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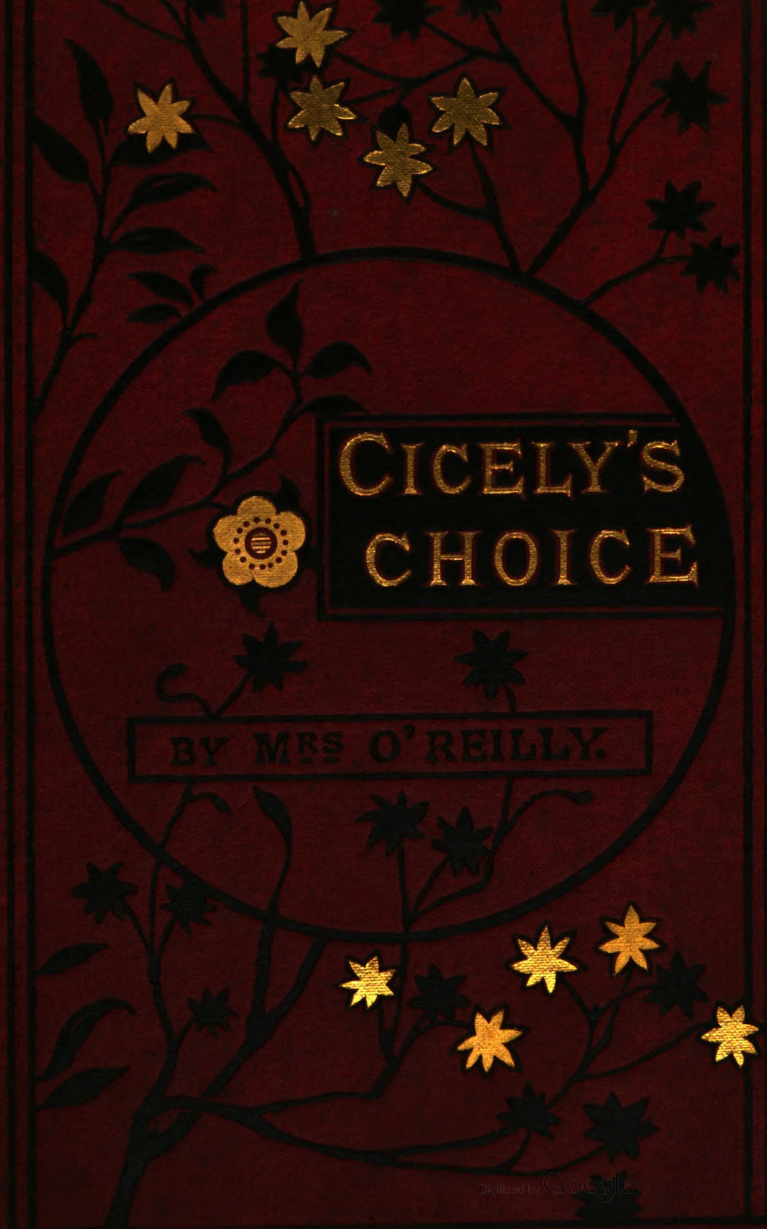

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CICELY'S CHOICE.

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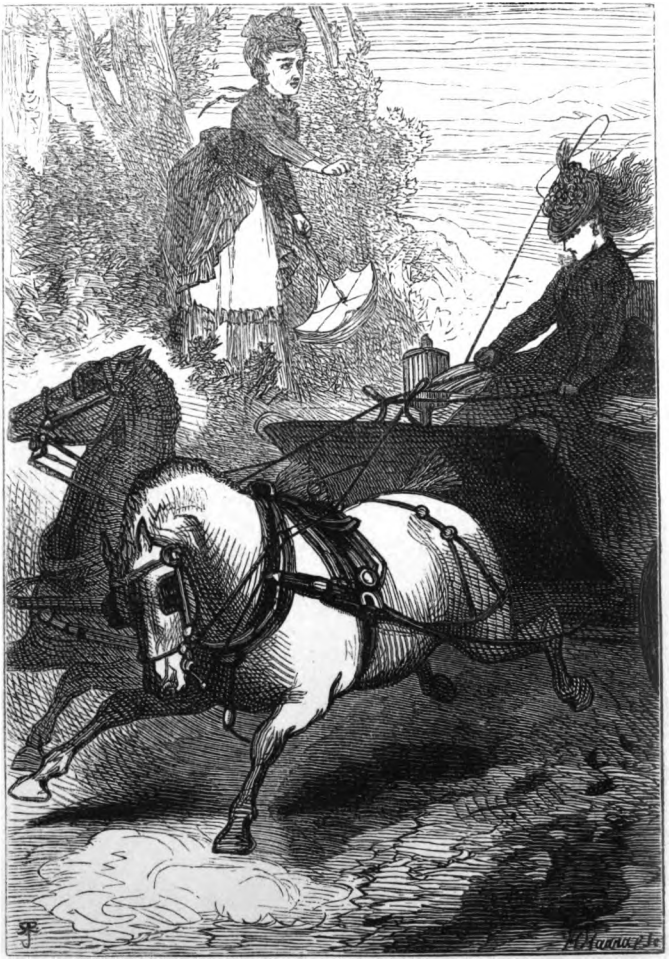

"STOP THEM! OH, WILL NO ONE STOP THEM?"

Page 3.

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CICELY'S CHOICE.

BY

MRS. ROBERT O'REILLY,

AUTHOR OF "DAISY'S COMPANIONS," "DOLL WORLD," ETC.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY A. J. PASQUIER.

LONDON:
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CICELY'S CHOICE.

CHAPTER I.

THE JEWELS GO DOWN HILL.

A YOUNG girl, dressed in deep mourning, was driving a phaeton and pair of ponies up a long, winding hill. The evening was lovely, so was the road. Newly-cut hay in the meadows on either side perfumed the air, the hedges were wreathed with wild roses, the time was near sunset, and shadows lay long and cool over the land. In the far distance—now and then lost to sight for a moment as it plunged into a clump of trees or disappeared behind a group of farm-buildings—a train crossed the landscape, but whether the train itself was visible or not, its progress was easily tracked by the white clouds of steam accompanying it. As

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she caught sight of those fleecy clouds floating over the tree-tops in the valley beneath her, Cicely touched the ponies with the whip, and leaning forward urged them on with her voice as well.

"Diamond! Ruby! quick, dear jewels; we are late."

The "jewels" were only too willing to be quick; they broke into a gallop, the light carriage swaying from side to side as they went. But when the top of the rising ground was reached and the descent began on the other side, even Cicely, apt as she was at all times to drive recklessly, wished she had not excited them so much, for they were beyond her control, the carriage pressed on them from behind, and half maddened they rushed down the steep incline. Fortunately the sound of wheels descending at such a pace the steepest hill in those parts attracted the attention of some haymakers. One or two men left their work and ran to intercept the terrified animals before they should reach a dangerously sharp turn in the road half-way down; and many more haymakers, young and old, crowded to the hedge to

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see the accident,—for an accident all made sure there would be.

No one was *so* sure of it as a middle-aged lady who had been quietly pursuing her way on foot up the hill down which the phaeton was coming. She stood aside in the hedge to let it pass. Willingly would she have helped had help seemed possible, but all that it occurred to her to do was to wave her parasol, and cry,—

"Stop them! oh, will no one stop them?"

Just then came the crash. Either one of the men did succeed in catching hold of the reins and checking the ponies, or their driver succeeded in pulling them into the hedge, for ponies, carriage, hedge, haymakers, and young lady, seemed all to be mixed in frightful confusion together; men shouted, women screamed, the ponies kicked and struggled, and the middle-aged lady still held on tight to her parasol and implored "some one" to "stop them," though by this time, to be out of harm's way, she had contrived to scramble up a high bank, and waved and implored from amongst a wilderness of ferns and bramble-bushes.

They were stopped enough now, however, and

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the young girl was standing in safety in the road. As the turmoil subsided she looked up at the lady in the hedge, and nodded.

"I had no idea the sense of danger was so exhilarating," she said, slightly raising her voice to make sure of being heard.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the lady.

"Yes, it really is; I suppose, though, *any* keen excitement is exhilarating. Thank you, Joyce; I don't think there's much harm done; stand at their heads a minute or two, will you? It is all your fault, Aunt Joan; you *are* Aunt Joan, are you not?"

"I am to conclude, then, that you are Cicely," said Miss Joan Damer, cautiously descending from her elevated position; "exhilarating indeed! you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You have had a narrow escape of being killed."

"I fancy I have," said Cicely, turning to look at the summit of the hill, which from where they stood seemed to touch the sky, and shuddering a little as she glanced at the steep, stony road; but the momentary look of gravity that had overspread her animated countenance passed away

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as she went on speaking. "I was coming to fetch you, Aunt. It was too bad! I only found out an hour ago that Lady Stanner had chosen to drive this afternoon, and no orders had been given to send to the station. Of course I had the 'jewels' put to instantly, and came myself, but you must have thought it very inhospitable; I assure you it wasn't my fault. Shall we go on for your luggage, or will you leave it to come by the carrier, and drive straight home, as you are already halfway there?"

"Drive! with those ponies?" Miss Joan would rather walk for ever. "Are you mad to propose such a thing, Cicely?" she said.

"But, my dear Aunt, they won't do it again. Their having just done it is the very best security. No time so safe to travel by rail as the day after an accident, and the principle holds good with regard to driving." But at this point the man in charge of the ponies touched his hat and observed that the carriage was hardly safe for the ladies by themselves.

"This here one's foot have been through the front panel, Miss; can't say just exactly what's

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wrong, but the chay ain't to be trusted not to break down somewheres, and that might start 'em off again, you see."

"Then, perhaps, we had better walk."

"*Perhaps!*" Miss Joan gave her skirts an indignant shake as she gathered them up out of the dust and prepared to start again upon her way. "Is there no short-cut to the Hall?" she asked.

"Oh, yes; by that gate a little way on we can get into the meadows; it will be pleasant there. Isn't it a lovely evening?" And bidding Joyce lead home the "jewels," Cicely stepped lightly on before her aunt.

Miss Damer looked at her young guide with no little curiosity. Her own nerves had been so shaken by the adventure of which she had been merely a spectator that she marvelled to see the slight effect it had upon its heroine.

"Are you able to walk, my dear?" she said; "after the shock you have undergone, I fear you must feel unequal to any exertion just at present."

"What shock? Oh, Aunt Joan!" and Cicely

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stopped short and clasped her hands together; "You can't tell what it was. It seems like a dream even now, and it was ten days ago, you know." She burst into tears as she spoke, while Miss Damer stared at her in hopeless bewilderment.

"Ten days ago?" she repeated. Then, in the tone of one who had solved a problem, "Oh, your uncle—you are thinking of him. It was a great loss for you."

"For me—for everyone! You little know how he will be missed; and Frank only just gone —— That gate doesn't open, Aunt Joan."

"Then, pray, how am I to pass?"

"Climb," said Cicely laconically, getting over herself, and turning to offer a hand to Miss Damer. But it was no easy matter to entice that lady over a five-barred gate; she would have much preferred going two miles round, even at the risk of being late for dinner, and it was not till some time had been wasted in vain endeavours to force apart the linked chain twisted round the gate-posts, that Cicely prevailed, and the two fairly started on the pleasant path through the

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meadows, with Hurst Hall in view all the way.

How pleasant those meadows were! The river ran through them, and the tall trees which the Squire had never allowed to be lopped of their lower branches, though his neighbours told him it was bad farming to leave them, stood here and there in the hedge-rows, making a deep pleasant shade at noonday, in which the tired haymakers could rest and enjoy their "noonings." At this hour, however, coolness and sweet fresh air reigned supreme, and the dry warm earth, from which the hay had been just carried, was more comfortable to Miss Damer's tired feet than the dusty road. She looked about her well pleased.

"It is odd you should never have been here before," remarked Cicely, after pointing out the chief objects of interest in the lovely landscape; "Uncle Bertram was so fond of the place."

"Not at all odd. I seldom move from home, and your uncle only purchased the estate six or seven years ago."

"Six; he brought us here the same autumn. How well I remember it! I was ten, you know,

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and the complete change made a great impression. *Such* a change as it was,—such peace and rest for Mama. Poor darling! she did not live long to enjoy it, only a few months. Am I like her, do you think, Aunt Joan?"

Miss Damer took a long look at the pretty face under the shady hat, noticed the fresh, healthful complexion, the quantities of fair hair, which contrasted so well with the deep mourning dress, and shook her head.

"You are not in the least like your mother; that is to say, not as I remember her: you may have heard we never met since her marriage."

An angry flush mantled in Cicely's cheeks.

"I know — I've heard," she answered; "but then you used to write, and send things, too, when we were very badly off. I knew you wouldn't think me like Mama; no one does, and I ask everyone I can. I believe I've a faint hope that some day or other some one will detect a family likeness between us; Marion is her image."

"How is Marion educated? She has, or had, a governess, I presume?"

"No, indeed! I have always taught her myself.

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Bertram, of course, must go to school when he is old enough, but I shall never allow any stranger to teach Marion."

Miss Damer gave her niece another of the half-surprised, half-compassionate looks with which she had from time to time regarded her, ever since their first very startling introduction to each other, but she only said,—

"And yourself? How long have you had the entire control of your own conduct, pray? and are you in the habit of driving about the country alone in this wild manner?"

"Not in *this* manner exactly," Cicely answered, laughing; "we don't make a 'habit' of an upset, but I do drive alone a good deal. Uncle Bertram used to ride mostly — Oh, if he could but see how Mr. Peter uses Lady Bess!"

"*Mr.* Peter!" repeated Miss Joan, "he also is your uncle."

"Don't feel like it. I've seen very little of him, you know, and whenever he came down he used to tell tales of me — not that darling uncle believed them! — and find fault with the children. I shall be glad when they are *all* gone! Why,

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I am more at home with you, aunt, though I never saw you before till this afternoon, than I am with any of the others. Lady Stanner is insincere, and Mrs. Hart——"

"I did not ask for your opinion of my sisters," said Miss Damer, stiffly; "when I was young it was not thought seemly that a girl of your age should express herself with so much freedom about her elders."

Cicely flushed up to the roots of her hair.

"I beg your pardon," she said, and relapsed at once into silence.

Miss Damer made one or two attempts at further conversation, but finding her efforts were not responded to, grew silent also, feeling rather amused than otherwise to see how suddenly she had fallen in her niece's estimation. There was much to occupy her thoughts. Before meeting with Cicely she had chafed inwardly at the neglect shown in allowing her to make her own way up to the Hall, telling herself that had her brother been living he would have given her a different reception. But, a week ago, his funeral had taken place, and it was to meet her two sisters and

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only surviving brother that she had undertaken her present journey, for Mr. Bertram Damer had died without a will. Not that this made any difference to his brother and sisters, for he had a son living who had recently married, and was now gone, taking his bride with him, to rejoin his regiment abroad. Possibly his father's death, which had been terribly sudden and unexpected, might recall him at once; certainly, it would enable him to live at home if he chose. But if the absence of a will made no difference to Lady Stanner, or Mrs. James Hart, to Mr. Peter Damer, or to Miss Joan herself, it made a very great difference to Cicely and her little brother and sister—the Squire's orphan nieces and nephew who had lived with him for the last six years, and been to him as his own. It was this that had brought Miss Damer from her home in Hampshire. Cold, staid, middle-aged maiden lady that she was, never on particularly cordial terms with any of her family, reputed to care for no one but herself, and to be immovably fixed in her own old-maidish ways, she yet had wondered what would become of these children, and, dissatisfied

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with Lady Stanner's rambling epistles, from which it was impossible to gather any distinct information, she had come to see for herself how matters stood. She was surprised and startled to find that Cicely was evidently quite unaware of the change in her own prospects, or of the fact that she and the little Marion and Bertram were absolutely dependent upon the charity of their relations. Cicely even spoke of being "glad when they were gone," as if it had never dawned upon her that Hurst was her home no longer; and yet, Miss Joan thought, she could hardly be so childish or so ignorant as not to know better.

"What did you say was your age, my dear?" she asked, and to so direct a question the most resolutely silent of young ladies could not refuse an answer.

"I did not mention my age, that I am aware of, Miss Damer, but I am sixteen."

The somewhat stern expression of Miss Damer's features relaxed into a smile; it was impossible to help it, and yet she could not but feel sorry for the child, and more than ever anxious as to her future.

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CHAPTER II.

A DISCUSSION BY MOONLIGHT.

"FRANK — even if he were still unmarried — is hardly the man to burden himself with a family of orphan cousins; at all events, *I* must decline the responsibility of advising him in the matter," said Mr. Peter, speaking from behind the *Times* newspaper; "he should be left free — free as air."

"Poor darling Cicely! my heart bleeds for her. And thinking of one's own girls, you know, and all that, it is really most trying to the feelings. I do hope something comfortable will be settled;" and Lady Stanner leaned back in her arm-chair, sipped her coffee meditatively, and looked the picture of comfort herself — in spite of her bleeding heart.

"She has been outrageously spoiled, and now does her best to spoil the younger ones; but

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there! the time has come for her to reap as she has sown," said Mrs. Hart.

"As our late poor brother has sown, you mean," rejoined Mr. Peter: "be just, Maria; the very injudicious indulgence shown by Bertram to our niece is not to be be imputed to her as a fault—or if a fault, it is one which we may hope that the school of adversity will be permitted to correct."

"A *cheap* school, I hope," continued Mrs. Hart, who had not quite entered into her brother's idea. "We could then all contribute our mite, for the little ones must be provided for elsewhere, you know."

"Sweet little Marion!" sighed Lady Stanner, looking out upon the lawn and the lake beyond, all silvered now by floods of moonlight; "but children are always happy; she would soon get over the parting, I make no doubts."

"And be the happier for it in the end. Cicely must finish her own education, and then, perhaps, a few years hence, we might contrive to get her respectably married. After that naturally *our* responsibility with regard to her brother and sister ceases. But it is to be hoped she will learn to

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control that very disagreeable temper of hers; her spirit wants breaking;" and Mrs. Hart spoke a little as if she would like to break it herself.

"It is necessary to take some immediate steps," began Mr. Peter, after a short pause, during which the silence had been broken only by the sound of falling water in the fountain on the terrace: "it is not possible to leave things as they are until we hear from Frank."

"And when will that be?" asked Miss Damer; she had hardly spoken hitherto, and her voice seemed to startle her hearers: they had not yet rung for lights, and Miss Joan was invisible in the angle of the great sofa; indeed, they had forgotten she was in the room at all. Mr. Peter turned towards the darkest corner of the room and made a little bow at it—it was a way of his, to preface his speeches by a little bow.

"Not for four or five months," he said; "I greatly fear we can hear nothing of Frank for that space of time, or even longer, owing to the mad scheme proposed by the young couple of passing their honeymoon in the Rocky Mountains. I

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should not have advised such a thing myself, and it is always a mistake for a man to give no address. This is, I am sorry to say, a case in point."

"Frank had four months of leave to waste, and intended to waste it by taking the overland route to San Francisco, and dawdling on the way. He will get no letters from England till he reaches Hongkong," explained Mrs. Hart.

"Unfortunate," murmured Lady Stanner; "if it had not been arranged that we should go abroad this summer I might have kept the darling children, but it seems my fate never to be free to yield to my own wishes. Conflicting duties, Joan, you know."

"I can hardly offer my young niece an asylum in my bachelor lodging in St. James's Street," laughed Mr. Peter.

"And I'm sure James would never hear of my bringing her home!" said Mrs. Hart, "even if there was any chance of her being happy with us; and as it is, I've no patience, we should only make each other miserable. As far as money

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goes my husband would let me do my part, I am sure of that; but there seems to be a feeling that Frank ought—in fact, we are all at a loss till we hear what Frank chooses to allow them."

"He is not *bound* to allow anything—they have no absolute claim!" remarked Mr. Peter emphatically.

"They *have!*" came with equal emphasis from Miss Joan's dark corner.

"Ah, well! no *legal* claim, I should say. I believe him to be a most excellent young man; he will doubtless be guided, and do all that is right, but to know what he will do we must wait to hear from him, and meantime ——" Mr. Peter paused.

"Meantime what?" questioned Mrs. Hart, sharply.

"Ah, yes! and meantime?" ejaculated Lady Stanner, leaning forward to look at the moon, now high over the tree-tops, and filling all the night with its soft splendour.

Miss Joan left her sofa, and came full into the broad path of moonlight which streamed from

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the open window right across the room, and her plain, stern face thus lit up seemed plainer and sterner than ever.

"Meantime there is no need to trouble yourselves," she said. "*I* undertake the children."

As she spoke the moonlight was intercepted by a dark figure, which really seemed to rise out of the earth, so suddenly did it appear. Lady Stanner pushed back her chair, and gave a little scream as Cicely stepped in at the window. Her face was pale, and her long hair out of curl from exposure to the falling dews. Her voice shook with suppressed passion as she looked round upon her uncle and aunts.

"I have been sitting here—just at your feet, Lady Stanner, on the sill; I thought you saw me—I did not know before that darling uncle's death had left us unprovided for; and now that I *do* know it, there is nothing for your heart to bleed about I assure you, my kind aunt, and pray don't any of you trouble yourselves. *I* will take care of the little ones. I am not afraid of the cheap school of adversity, Mr. Peter; and *you* at least, Mrs. Hart, shall not suffer from my

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very disagreeable temper. Miss Damer ——" but here Cicely was at fault; as Miss Joan had said nothing in the least unkind, there was no biting sarcasm ready to apply to her. After a pause for consideration, no more cutting words occurred to the poor child than, "Miss Damer, I wish you good night; *I* will 'undertake' my brother and sister, thank you!"

"I am glad you are going to bed, Cicely," said Miss Joan quietly, and making room for her to pass as she spoke; "it is late, and you are over-excited. At your age I always went to my room at ten o'clock: good night, my dear."

No one else made any remark at all. Cicely's exit was by no means so dignified as she had intended.

It was only too true that she had been wofully spoiled. Her mother—always the Squire's favourite sister—had married against the wishes of her family, and when the marriage had turned out a most miserable one, and her husband's misconduct had brought her to extreme poverty, the family ignored her existence; all but Mr. Damer himself, that is to say, and, from time to time,

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Miss Joan. Cicely could well remember now and then going to bed hungry, and other circumstances of the wretched state of "genteel poverty," during which a parcel or hamper from "Aunt Joan" had been matter of rejoicing for weeks together,—such rejoicing as almost counterbalanced the irritation caused by long letters of good advice—advice quite impossible to follow, and utterly wide of the mark. But "Uncle Bertram" had been a constant friend: his name was associated with every pleasure of her childhood, and with almost every smile she had ever seen upon her mother's face, and on the death of his brother-in-law he had at once taken his widowed sister and her little ones to his own home. Here, for the last six years, Cicely's life had been one of luxury and indulgence. True, the loss of her mother, who survived her unworthy husband barely twelve months, was a terrible grief; but it was her only one, and the sense of responsibility towards her young brother and sister with which she had grown up had served to keep her loving and unselfish. Her life at Hurst had been very happy, and very unlike that of the generality

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of girls. The Squire, owing to a vivid recollection of the stern rule under which his own sisters had been reared, dreaded anything like the exercise of authority. Cicely hardly knew what it was to be coerced, hardly remembered a time when she had not been her own mistress, and indeed, mistress of Hurst itself. This last fact had been a great grievance to her aunts, Lady Stanner and Mrs. Hart. They agreed that it was unbearable to be welcomed by that mere child as if she was quite in her right place, and to see her dining at table with her elders, and overhearing all that was said—nay, actually joining in the conversation, and giving her opinions as it pleased her! For the child's own good, Mrs. Hart,—herself a stern disciplinarian, who really seemed to be taking her revenge upon her own children for the harsh treatment she had been subject to at their ages,—tried to persuade the Squire to indulge Cicely less and restrain her more. Lady Stanner caressed the girl often, and always spoke most sweetly to her; yet Cicely found that it was always her ladyship who pointed out to her brother any faults that had been com-

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mitted, and tried, as she expressed it, to "get her into trouble." On the whole Cicely preferred what she called the open enmity of one aunt to the false friendship of the other.

And neither need have been enemies had Cicely only shown them a very little respect and attention! It certainly was provoking to see the airs she sometimes gave herself, and to know how she cherished the memory of the neglect shown to her mother. Cicely's imagination had a great deal to do with this "neglect;" and as for herself, now that she was no longer poor, but the adopted daughter of their elder brother, her uncle and aunts were perfectly ready to be kind to her and her brother and sister. Cicely's mother would have been the first to grieve over the way in which the girl brooded over the past: a past already so distant that she could not possibly judge how much of her very dim recollection of it all was correct.

When his sisters, or even Mr. Peter, was with him, the poor Squire was always more or less uncomfortable. He felt they disapproved of his management of the orphans,—nay, of his adoption

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of them. He loved peace and quietness, dreaded the disputes arising daily and hourly between Mrs. Hart and his niece; dreaded still more the soft complaining of Lady Stanner and the good advice of his brother. The consequence of all this was that they very seldom came to Hurst at all, and when they did so it was always matter of open rejoicing to Cicely, and secret satisfaction to her uncle, when the visit was over.

As for the young girl's education, that had really suffered very little from the indulgence shown her. A keen appetite for knowledge, and an ardent affection for her adopted father, himself a scholar of no mean order, sufficed to make her so industrious and eager a student that the necessity had never arisen for inflicting upon her—or perhaps upon the Squire—the presence of a governess. The extent of Cicely's reading, the odd, out-of-the way fund of information she had contrived to pick up, and the varied range of subjects she had studied—and in not a few instances studied thoroughly—surprised Miss Damer when she came to know her better; but, dear me! how shocked the poor lady was at the many

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orthodox "lessons," as she called them, that had been totally neglected. Truth compels me to confess that Cicely could not "say her Popes," had very few dates at her fingers' ends, was almost ignorant of the use of needle and thread, and, worse than all, knew no language but her own! Moreover, she could not have repeated the multiplication table to save her life, and declared she saw no good in learning it. The Squire had a fashion of his own with regard to arithmetic, and Cicely had adopted it; the results they arrived at were invariably correct, but the road by which they reached them was a mystery known only to themselves. Cicely was educating the eight-year-old Marion according to certain theories over which she was sometimes excessively eloquent and argumentative, and she would have esteemed it a real misfortune had anything obliged her to give up the post of instructress to the little girl.

Marion was asleep in the moonlit room to which Cicely betook herself after leaving the drawing-room. The child's gentle, regular breathing seemed to hush the elder girl as she knelt by

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the bedside, her face hidden in her hands, and the storm of passion gradually subsiding. Cicely was a little afraid she had made herself ridiculous, the thing above all others that she shrank most from doing. She tried to recall exactly what it was that she had said, and wished she could forget the sarcastic smile with which Mr. Peter had listened, and the shrug of Mrs. Hart's shoulders. There was a very clear idea in her own mind of *how* she intended to provide for the little ones. Sitting on the low step outside the drawing-room window, so close to Lady Stanner that even now Cicely could not divest herself of the notion that that lady *had* seen her, and had taken a spiteful pleasure in allowing her to overhear the conversation, the future had shaped itself quite distinctly to her imagination. One of the few friends who had remained faithful to her mother in her days of poverty was a former governess. This lady now kept a finishing school for girls. To her Cicely meant to apply to be received as pupil-teacher, a home for all three to be the equivalent of her services. Little Bertram might be a difficulty by-and-by; but before

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he was old enough for a boys' school, Cicely felt confident she should be in a position to send him to one. It was not a badly considered plan; its only fault was self-will. Could it be right for Cicely to reject the help of her relations, and insist upon independence? Is independence — especially at sixteen — invariably a virtue?

More and more distinctly, as night wore on, did this question shape itself to the young girl's conscience, till at last, weary with thinking, she cried herself to sleep at the remembrance of the overwhelming loss which had rendered necessary any such anxious thought on her part.

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CHAPTER III.

"IN THE HAY."

"DEAR me! you are by no means so old as you should be," exclaimed Miss Damer. She had asked to see the personal attendant of her niece, and her feelings received a shock when, on hearing the expected knock at her door, her "come in" was answered by a "young person," instead of, as she had made up her mind would be the case, by some old family servant. Everyone at Hurst seemed most perplexingly young to Miss Joan. Her remark gave poor Martha the uncomfortable impression that her youth was her own fault, and that she *might* have been older if she chose.

"I've lived up at the Hall since I was fifteen, ma'am," she said. "I came up to take charge of Master Bertram the very day my mistress arrived, and I've never left him, nor the young

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ladies neither, since. I hope, ma'am, it will be convenient for me to go with them now? Blood is thicker than water, they say, and it do seem natural they should be with you; but Miss Cicely, she was taking on dreadful just now."

"Taking on, was she? more than usual, do you mean? more than she has done since my brother's death?"

"Her ladyship have been in Miss Cicely's room, ma'am," replied Martha, as if that fact fully accounted for any excess of excitement.

"Ah, I see! her ladyship—well, get on with your packing as fast as possible; my niece will be better when we are once out of this atmosphere."

This sounded like a reflection upon the salubrity of Hurst. Martha returned to observe,—

"Please, ma'am, the air about here is considered healthy."

"My good girl, I was alluding to the moral atmosphere."

"Was you, indeed, ma'am?" replied Martha, respectfully; she had no idea what a moral atmosphere might be, but as she was fond of re-

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marking down stairs, "the gentry talk beautiful, and it's very improving to listen to them."

The last day came. Lady Stanner and Mrs. Hart had returned to town; only Mr. Peter remained, sometimes deep in consultation with Frank's lawyers, sometimes walking with the agent over the estate; at all times—so he said—watchful over his nephew's interests; certainly dreadfully alarmed lest poor Cicely should take away from the house any, the merest trifle, that was not lawfully hers. Marion and little Bertram took leave separately of every nook and corner of the only home they could remember. They were at an unsentimental age and found it great fun, a kind of new play, to say "good-bye" to everything and everyone about the place; to roam over the park and gardens, to visit every cottage in the village, to penetrate into the stables, the coach-house, the wood-loft, and to appear in the most unexpected places, even places where they had never been before in their lives, but which it was, of course, necessary to visit "for the last time." So universal were the farewells, that when at the close of the long, hot June day

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Martha summoned them to bed, there was a sudden cry from Marion.

"The pig-sties! Bertie, we haven't said good-bye to the pigs;" and the idea of bed could be by no means entertained until a visit was paid to those unsavoury regions. Even after that, Bertram, just as he was supposed to be "settling nicely," rose up in his crib with the exclamation,—

"May, we didn't never say good-bye to the wine holes in the cellar!"

To which a very sleepy voice made answer from the adjoining room, where May's little bed stood beside her sister's,—

"*Bins*, dear; we'll do it to-morrow."

And the morrow came. For the last time Cicely stood at the window of the room that had been hers so long. It looked over the front entrance. Beyond the gay flower-beds enamelling the lawn, surrounded by its dark belt of evergreens, she could see the avenue leading through the park to the lodge-gates. How well she remembered passing through those gates years ago with her mother's arms thrown round her! and now she

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was to pass through them once again, but this time friendless and alone; so she liked to think, for, in truth, she was by no means alone, and need not have been friendless had she chosen to make friends with those who were quite ready to be kind! She spoke no more of her plans; once only had she alluded to them before Miss Joan, and that lady's calm reply had, somehow, seemed to deprive her niece of the power of enlarging upon her views.

"I remember Mrs. Maxwell perfectly; an estimable person; you could not have done better than apply to her had you been called upon to provide for yourself. Happily, such is not the case, my dear."

But if Cicely was silent, her resolution to be independent was firmly fixed. She took, indeed, no steps to attain her object, but outwardly allowed herself to drift with the stream; in fact, the more she indulged in her visionary schemes, and the more clear and distinct they grew, the more indifferent she appeared to any schemes other people might form for her; the result being so far satisfactory that she offered no opposition

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at all to her aunt's arrangements; suffered Martha to pack her clothes and treasures, helped the children to collect their heterogeneous possessions, and stood now ready dressed for a journey, and prepared to follow Miss Damer—whither, Cicely did not much care. She harangued eloquently to herself upon the cold-heartedness of the relations, who thought the orphans a burden, and the austerity of the aunt, who seemed to intend to treat her as a mere school-room girl, and to ignore utterly the noble spirit of independence by which she was animated. For Miss Damer had been too wise to ask Cicely's formal consent to her arrangements, preferring to avoid discussion by taking a great deal for granted. Doubtless she would have quailed before the biting sarcasms her niece was rehearsing in private, if only she could have heard them; but unspoken speech, however eloquent, is inaudible, and Miss Joan remained in happy ignorance of Cicely's cutting remarks and high-flown resolves.

The poor child had troubles enough without creating imaginary ones. She leant from the window to catch a glimpse that was just visible

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above the trees, of the church spire; its shadow fell, she knew, across a new-made grave; the grass was not green there yet, and before the first daisies blossomed on it she would be far away. As she recalled all the love and tenderness lavished upon her, as she lived over again the last illness, the cruel shock of a death so sudden that there had been no time for farewells to be exchanged, tears blinded her eyes and fell thick and fast. As she dashed them away, her gaze was so intently fixed upon that one peep of the grey tower rising from amidst a clump of elms, that she did not see what went on immediately beneath the window, and so engrossed were her thoughts that she heard, without noting, the sound of a horse's hoofs upon the gravel. It was not till a low whistle attracted her attention that she looked down. A boy about her own age was looking up.

"Cicely!"

"Ralph! Oh, don't ring! I'll come;" and in another moment she had joined him at the front door. Their hands met eagerly.

"The Squire!" was Ralph's first word; "we were so grieved. I can hardly believe it is true."

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"Yes, oh, yes! But come to the stables; the carriage will not be round just yet; we can put Selim up and have a talk. Are you all back? Mrs. Morland, and the boys? Ralph, I thought I should be torn away without seeing the face of a friend!"

"Then you *are* going? My mother sent me over to see if we could be of any use. We heard there was no will, and——" Ralph hesitated.

"Now, *don't* blame Uncle Bertram; that is the one thing I will not bear," cried Cicely.

"*I'm* not likely to blame the dear old Squire, if he died ten times over, and left all the world unprovided for! But, I say, let me drive you to the station. We can have the jewels, I suppose?"

Cicely shook her head. They had reached the stable-door, and the jewels were neighing a welcome at the sound of the familiar voice of their mistress.

"We can't have *anything*—*I* can't, at least. I am nothing here now—should not dare to give an order; besides (dear creatures! I'm thankful they were not hurt!), they ran away with me down Red Hill, and the carriage was smashed.

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I might have been smashed, too; but, there! no such luck."

"Don't!" said Ralph, as he led Selim into a stall, for Cicely had flung her arms round Ruby's neck, and was crying on his bay shoulder. Her companion made no other attempt at consolation, however, and by-and-by she dried her eyes.

"The hay is cut in the four-acre meadow, Ralph. Come there; we can see the front door, you know, and I've heaps to tell you."

The boy and girl established themselves comfortably on a great heap of fragrant hay, sitting together as they had sat many and many a June morning before. Ralph had been sent with a warm invitation to the orphans to go at once to his parents, if matters were not otherwise settled.

"It is hard for you, Cicely; you were as good as mistress of this place, and here it is, all gone in a moment."

"Don't pity me for the wrong thing," cried Cicely, earnestly; "pity me because Uncle Bertram is dead, and I shall never see his dear face, or hear his voice again, but not because I am poor. I *like* being poor; life is much more interesting

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when one's fortunes change. I am not the least afraid for the future — listen, Ralph," and she detailed her plans with much animation. Ralph sat in the hay and stared.

"But—I don't understand," he said at length; "are you obliged to do all this? You've got plenty of friends."

"The bread of dependence would choke me."

"Hear! hear! The Squire's bread didn't choke, did it? Why, Cis, you've been dependent all your days. You seem to have thriven pretty well on the choking system."

"Oh, how different it was to take benefits from *him!* To the others we are only a burden. If you could have heard the way in which Uncle Peter and my aunts spoke ——"

"Whew!" Ralph gave a long whistle; "*Uncle* Peter, is it?"

Cicely blushed. The truth was, that only that morning Miss Damer had mentioned that she particularly disliked the affectation of speaking of relations as though they were mere acquaintances, and was sure her niece would oblige her by discontinuing the habit, and Cicely, having no

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retort ready, had bowed her head in acquiescence, and was far too honest to break the implied promise.

"Aunt Joan prefers it," she said; "and really it is a matter of no importance whatever; they *are* my relations, of course."

"Yes, they can't escape that honour. What sort is Miss Damer?"

"Well-meaning," answered Cicely; "oh, yes, well-meaning enough" (if Miss Joan could but have heard her!); "but you see she comes forward merely from a sense of duty,—that is unmistakable."

"A sense of duty is a very respectable thing, as the world goes."

"Oh, Ralph! one wants so much more than that to make life tolerable. Was it from duty that Uncle Bertram devoted himself to us? or is it *duty* which makes me ready to go through fire and water for the little ones, do you think?"

"Fire and water," Ralph repeated dreamily, and intent upon making a blue corn-flower stick upright in Cicely's hat; "not duty, eh? what then?"

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"Love, affection—there was no sense of obligation on either side, any more than there could ever be between myself and the children."

"There might be a sense of obligation some day or other, that is, if you carry out your schemes; who knows but what, when she's a big girl, if you contradicted Marion she might find your bread choked her? Stoop forward, Cis, I can't reach, those tags and ends of ribbon are in the way;" he was adding a poppy to the cornflower now, and Cicely stooped her head obediently; "if the Squire had left a will you would have considered yourself bound by it, eh?"

"Of course; his lightest wishes would be sacred to me—if I only knew them! probably he would have arranged for us to live here still."

"Here?"

"Yes, with Frank and Annie; she is charming, and they will come home now, you know."

"Mrs. Frank was here a week, wasn't she?"

"What then? I see what you mean, but a week is quite time enough in which to judge of a person; Annie is sympathetic — I could not live without sympathy."

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"Will Mrs. Maxwell, the teachers, the other girls, and all the rest of it, will they be sympathetic?"

"Now, Ralph, you are unfeeling."

"Oh, no! not that. Don't think I can't feel for you. Why it was here in this very field, one haying time, that the Squire gave me my first tip! How many happy days I owe to him, and to you, Cicely! We have been very jolly at Hurst. I've my own share of trouble, you know, for I dare say I shall never see you again when you go off with this precious Aunt Joan of yours. Now promise me you'll come to *us* before you try school-keeping, if you are so choked by the bread of the lady with a sense of duty as to be driven to leave her."

"I won't promise that, but I claim your promise to help me if I want help some day, Ralph."

"Done! I'm your man; damsel in distress, and faithful knight to the rescue, is a sort that suits me. Summon me, and I come. Joking apart, you know I will always do anything I can for you, and mother and father will, too, for that matter. I know it's rather turning the tables,

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Cis, for it used to be you to give advice, and me to listen to it; but you won't be angry to-day if I suggest that perhaps you are in want of something besides sympathy."

"And what may that be?"

"Support: you can't stand alone. Sympathy and support, you like alliterations, Cis."

There was silence for awhile. Ralph added a great ox-eyed daisy and a spike of feathery grass to the wreath in Cicely's hat, while she only smiled, a little sadly, but at least she was not offended. In her heart she was resolving that the letter to Mrs. Maxwell should be written before she slept one night under her aunt's roof, and as he watched her face Ralph wished she would go on talking. He thought her less likely to "make a goose of herself," as he secretly expressed it, if she vented her excitement in eloquent speechifying.

"I've heard it doesn't pay to take up responsibilities not laid upon us," he said in a low voice, as if speaking to himself, and still occupied in adorning the little travelling hat; "apt to end in a muddle."

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Still silence.

"Let off the steam, Cis," he whispered mischievously; but Cicely preferred to change the conversation to his own school affairs. One of their old long talks ensued, and when the carriage came to the door, and Cicely introduced Ralph to her Aunt as—

"Mr. Morland of Bennington's eldest son, Aunt Joan; they are our nearest neighbours and great friends of Uncle Bertram's," she wore a brighter face than at any time since she was first aware of her fallen fortunes,—a look Miss Damer thought more like that of the young girl who after nearly breaking her neck on Red Hill had talked about the exhilaration of the sense of danger. In fact, after that *tête-à tête* in the hay, Cicely did feel more herself, a little less like a heroine of romance—an orphan dependent upon her own exertions.

"Look! look!" cried little Marion, excitedly; "oh, sister, out of *this* window! You won't see the last of Hurst; you won't see the tops of the chimneys, to say good-bye to!"

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But Cicely could not look. She stared straight before her out of the opposite window. Miss Joan laid her hands on hers.

"My dear, I feel for you," she said.

Cicely burst into tears.

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CHAPTER IV.

"THOSE GIRLS."

At the back of Miss Damer's house was one of those quaint, old-fashioned walled gardens, with holly-trees cut into strange shapes, box-edged borders full of fragrant flowers, straight gravel walks, and the intermixture of fruit and flowers, now so seldom seen. Blue plums ripened on the wall, at the foot of which great cabbage roses blossomed, and tall white lilies alternating with crimson foxgloves stood sentinel all along it. No bedding-out plants would Miss Joan allow; the greenhouse — and a beautiful one it was — was a separate affair altogether, not used merely to feed the borders in which old favourites — great tufts of double china primrose, clumps of lily of the valley, sweet-william, and bachelor's buttons, grew year after year in the same spot. There was a rustic arbour at each end of the straight path

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which cut the garden into strips of broad smooth turf; and in one of these arbours wreathed with jasmine and honeysuckle Cicely loved to sit and dream away the hot noon hour. It was too hot, and she was too "unsettled," she said, to do anything *but* dream. Marion and Bertha played in the forest under Martha's care; Miss Damer was busy with household affairs and other matters in which Cicely took no interest—perhaps if she *had* tried to interest herself in any matters but those which concerned herself it might have been better for her. The letter to Mrs. Maxwell was not written, but she was not in the least less firmly resolved to write it—some day or other. Meantime it was hardly worth while to arrange a plan of study for herself or to attend to Marion's lessons. Bertie did say his hymn and spell through his appointed page of "Reading without Tears" daily, but anything else might well wait till Cicely's "plans were settled." She had expected that Miss Joan would assume airs of authority, would arrange her day for her, perhaps even interfere with her little sister's education. But Miss Joan did nothing of the sort.

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Cicely was almost as much her own mistress as she had been at Hurst. Her preparations to oppose her will to her aunt's, "where the children's good was concerned," as she expressed it, were all thrown away. It really seemed as if she was to have no opportunity of standing up for her friendless brother and sister. Miss Joan seemed too busy to attend much to her niece; at meals Marion's chatter monopolised the conversation; both she and her brother were growing very fond of Miss Damer, which in itself was rather a grievance to Cicely, who about this time wrote a poem upon the "ingratitude of childhood." The afternoons were spent generally in driving or walking in the forest, but the children were always of the party, and there was no opportunity for confidential talk had Cicely been disposed to avail herself of it. Nearly three weeks had passed in this way, and she began seriously to consider what she should say to Mrs. Maxwell, for her aunt had asked when Marion's lessons were to begin again, and though informed that it was the "poor child's holidays," had not seemed quite satisfied with the answer.

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Cicely sat in the arbour, a slip of paper and a pencil in her hand. She was noting down the heads of her epistle:—

"*Mem.*: To inform Mrs. M. of my dear uncle's death."

"Which she probably knows of already from the papers," commented Cicely to herself.

"To make her understand how firmly I am resolved upon independence."

"That will be a hard matter I fear: I know what commonplace people think. A safe home, and bread and butter with a relation: what more is wanted? Let us hope that Mrs. Maxwell may *not* be commonplace, but able to understand how infinitely I should prefer *earning* the bread — even without butter — for myself and the little ones. Now, what had I better do? ——"

"Sit on the water-butt!" broke in a clear, young voice from the other side of the wall: "it is just the place for you, Phillis. If you get excited, you will fall in, so you'll *have* to be calm and collected this time, and not kick."

"Kick?"

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"Well, you do: arms and legs, 'all of a work,' as nurse would say. Now, Constance, we are ready."

"So those girls are come back," said Cicely to herself, as, after the first moment of astonishment at the suggestion with regard to the water-butt—a suggestion that had come so pat in answer to her mental question, she remembered that the strip of ground immediately adjoining Miss Damer's garden, and only separated from it by the wall, belonged to her neighbour, Mrs. Ward, the widow of an officer.

"It is well they are friends of mine," Miss Joan had observed, "for, as you see, we overlook each other. When the girls were children they were frequently in scrapes with regard to that passage window, they liked to stand there and watch what I was about."

"Was that considered wrong?" asked Cicely.

"It was bad manners, my dear: their mother never allowed it. But they have outgrown all that, of course; and I only see a young face at the window when they wish to telegraph to me

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about something or other. I shall be glad when they come home; it will be an advantage for you, the society of girls your own age."

"I don't get on with girls, as a rule," said Cicely, who had been brought up with the nine Bennington boys, and had learnt to despise her own sex, and take a schoolboy's view of young ladies; "they are so petty: petty interests—little faults—gossip—quarrelling—vanities."

"You, my dear, yourself, are, then, the opposite of all this?"

"I did not say that, Aunt Joan; I only know that I should be very sorry to see Marion grow up like any girl *I* ever had the luck to meet."

"You must have been singularly unfortunate in your acquaintance," observed Miss Damer dryly.

And now here were "those girls" come back. "No more peace in *this* arbour," thought Cicely, as the chatter went on behind the wall; "and the sun shines straight into the other in the mornings. Well; it can't be helped; I must wait for my quiet time till the evening." She went on with her notes, but could not help listening to her neighbours at the same time.

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"We are ready, are we? I begin, then. Great men under discussion: Napoleon and Oliver Cromwell ——"

"Denied!" cried another voice; "Napoleon was *not* great; he had mean faults; he was vain."

"Nonsense! we shall never get on at that rate; we must take *something* for granted."

"Napoleon was great in the sense of having made himself a name above his fellows; you might say Julius Cæsar was not great because he was ambitious."

"But *that* is a respectable fault, not a mean one."

"Respectable! less despicable! I suppose you mean, but do go on, Constance."

"All right. Points of resemblance: both owed their position to the support of the army; both came to the head of affairs at a crisis in the fate of their country ——"

"Great men always do—you might have left that out."

"But it was hard to find anything to say."

"Both saved their country from a state of anarchy. Which was the greatest?"

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"Napoleon!"

"Oliver!"

"Reasons! give reasons!" cried the girl who had been called Constance.

"Oliver, because he did least harm," came from the direction of the water-butt.

Cicely actually stood up. Reverence for the memory of King Charles the Martyr was an article of faith with her; would no one mention that Oliver had been a regicide? Yes; Phillis was answered by a quieter voice than had yet spoken, and one which seemed to proceed from the foot of the wall,—

"Oliver voted for the murder of Charles."

"But that was one man's life only; look at the misery caused by Napoleon's wars."

Cicely sprang forward; one foot placed upon the large garden roller lying in a convenient position brought her animated face above the level of the wall, and confronted her with the girl of the water-butt.

"Napoleon's wars!" cried Cicely; "think of the garrison of Drogheda!"

"The retreat from Moscow!" retorted Phillis,

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much too excited to show any surprise at the interruption.

"But that was not deliberate cruelty—in cold blood—the word of one man. Napoleon was unfortunate,—Oliver wicked. Napoleon did not contrive and order the retreat for the express purpose of causing misery."

"He ran away from it."

A girl seated on a mossy stone immediately below Phillis looked up.

"All Napoleon gained for France, France has lost; all Oliver gained for us we have now."

"The *world's* test of merit—success or failure. For shame!" and Cicely looked down with indignation upon the last speaker.

"*What* did Oliver gain for us? I forget," said Phillis.

"Jamaica, of course," answered Constance, the eldest of the party, who held a piece of paper and a pencil in her hand, and occupied a commanding position upon a wheelbarrow turned upside down; "but I beg your pardon," she added, blushing a little and laughing as she turned to Cicely, "we are debating."

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"So it seemed," replied Cicely, colouring and smiling in return; "and I'm afraid *I* was debating, too. I had no business to pop in upon you like this, but I am weak upon the point of our Commonwealth. I can't endure Oliver Cromwell."

"Won't you come in — over I mean?" asked Constance, politely; "we forgot you were staying with Miss Damer, though we knew she expected a niece. Mama will be so glad to see you." She held up a helping hand as she spoke, of which Cicely unhesitatingly availed herself, and in another minute was actually on the ground in the midst of "those girls" whose return she had so much dreaded.

The debate, however, was over for the time being. Constance proposed introducing their new friend to their mother, and showing the gardens. On the way to the house they passed the swing, and Phillis offered to set it in motion for Cicely, with so evident a belief that she was conferring a kindness, that Cicely had not the heart to refuse. It was undignified certainly, but far from disagreeable; and as she went up almost into the

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tree-tops and felt the pleasant rush through the air, and heard the laughter of the girls, a sudden ludicrous sense struck her of the incongruity of her day-dreams and her present position. What was Mrs. Maxwell's pupil-teacher doing in mid-air? Was *this* the poor, proud orphan whose ambition it was to provide for her brother and sister, and who scorned dependence upon others? Cicely was rather glad that Constance took her place in the swing before they left it; it satisfied her that the Miss Wards did not consider the proceeding childish.

In the drawing-room they found Miss Damer, who, however pleased she might be to see her niece doing exactly as she wished her to do, namely, making acquaintance cordially enough with the very companions she preferred for her, was too wise to give any outward sign of satisfaction. She only nodded to her in a pause in the conversation. Mrs. Ward's gentle greeting made the stranger feel quite at home, and after it Phillis led the way to the "girls' room," leaving the ladies to themselves.

This, the pleasantest room in the house, was

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a long, low apartment with three windows opening to the ground, prettily furnished, boasting, of course, its piano and bookshelves, but chiefly remarkable for the amazing amount of curiosities and rubbish of all sorts which the sisters had accumulated between them. It reminded Cicely more of her own old room at Hurst than anything had done since she left it. She found herself drawn to these girls. Phillis amused her; Constance made sensible remarks, almost sensible enough for a boy; and Ellen's too evident admiration of Cicely herself quite won that young lady's heart. She was surprised to find how much they knew about her. Cold and uninterested as Aunt Joan appeared, it seemed that she had told Mrs. Ward a great deal about her niece. Constance remarked that it must be very interesting to educate a younger sister entirely, and asked many questions as to Cicely's theories. But the *most* astonishing thing was the evident affection all the girls felt for Miss Damer.

"She's a dear old thing," said Phillis; an expression that struck Cicely as singularly inappropriate.

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"Are you not very fond of her?' asked Ellen.

"I've not known her a month yet," answered Cicely; "and pray don't run away with the notion that I am a fixture here: I have my bread to earn."

Phillis, who thought this was said in joke, laughed, but Ellen whispered,—

"You prefer independence—it is a noble ambition, but what can you do?"

"Well done, literal Elly," said Constance, laughing; "she does not mean it; it is not flattering to credit her with meaning anything wrong or ungrateful to Miss Damer."

Wrong! Cicely coloured angrily, but it would be unladylike to quarrel, and she allowed the remark to pass without contradiction. Besides, what could she say in answer to Ellen's question? Confess that she had as yet taken no steps towards independence? It was already mortifying to explain that Marion was running wild, and her "theories" forgotten; that she, in short, was doing nothing but dream away her time, leaving the future to take care of itself. She was not even studying, and a glance at the Wards'

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bookshelves showed volumes in so many languages, that the fancy suddenly seized her to ask for French lessons.

"I'll teach anything I know in exchange," she said, and a bargain was soon struck. Constance undertook Cicely's French in return for lessons in botany to herself and in drawing to Phillis, who had a great taste for it, but had never received any instruction at all, whereas Cicely had been thoroughly well taught. A sketching party was arranged for the next day. Cicely went home laden with grammar and dictionary; she passed her evening in drawing up a set of rules for herself and Marion, and after she was gone to bed, Miss Damer found on the floor the notes for Mrs. Maxwell's letter.

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CHAPTER V.

A HEROINE IN DISTRESS.

"Good morning! do I interrupt you?" asked Miss Damer, one glowing summer day, as she entered Mrs. Ward's sitting-room by the wide open French window. That room was always cool; vases of fresh flowers stood on the tables and cabinets, the glare of sunshine was excluded by green blinds, and Mrs. Ward sat sewing in a low chair in her own particular corner; the corner where her little round table stood, with the Dresden cup, which it was Ellen's privilege to keep filled with roses as long as they lasted. When the roses were all over, Constance came into office and supplied "mother's cup" with autumn flowers, or even holly and ivy, until Phillis triumphantly displaced her eldest sister by bringing in the first violets and primroses of early spring.

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"You never interrupt me," said Mrs. Ward, looking up from her work; "but will you not sit here, on the sofa? you have chosen an uncomfortable seat."

"Thank you, I shall do very well. I *am* uncomfortable; I have no wish to appear otherwise. My dear, have you any objection to tell me how you manage the girls?"

Mrs. Ward laughed.

"I don't think I manage them at all," she said; "they do very much as they like. Some of my kind friends tell me *they* manage *me*. They are good girls, Miss Damer."

"That is it—that is the point!" said Miss Joan severely, and almost as though she were bringing an accusation against them: "they *are* good girls — happy, contented, occupied, with some respect for their elders—and I should like to know how it is you do it?"

Miss Joan sighed as she spoke, and sat looking at her friend with a reproachful expression of countenance. Evidently she felt that Mrs. Ward was answerable for the fact that her daughters were good girls.

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"How do you do it?" she repeated. "Nonsense! don't tell me it is *not* your doing!" (Mrs. Ward had not spoken,) "for it *is*, and if *you* have succeeded, why should you not be able to impart the secret? What is your method? I came over this morning for the express purpose of learning your method, and I intend to master it before I leave the house."

Mrs. Ward laughed outright. Her answer, if not exactly a reply to Miss Damer's words, was still very much to the point.

"I thought she was growing more contented. What has happened?"

"Nothing new. There was a scene this morning because I ventured in her presence to reprove little Marion for disobedience; but she is spoiling the child, indeed, both children. She is fast losing control over them herself, and I fear indirectly, perhaps unconsciously, teaches them to defy my authority."

This was partly true. A vague feeling of jealousy, to which poor Cicely yielded on seeing that her little brother and sister were growing attached to their aunt, had led her to try by

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excessive indulgence to retain their preference. The attempt ended as such attempts always do. Marion and Bertram were really happier under the kind, though firm rule of Miss Joan than when with their sister; and though they lavished caresses upon her, they were seldom good long together; and the only way in which she could win smiles, or keep them contented, was by allowing them to do just as they liked, especially by allowing them little indulgences which Miss Damer herself withheld from them. The effect of this upon both children was as bad as possible. From a lively, good-humoured, obedient little girl, Marion was fast turning into that very disagreeable character, a *clever* spoilt child; and little Bertram was already so wilful that Martha complained she did not know the child. "He wasn't noways the same as at Hurst, and maybe it was change of air as had done it." Many a battle did Cicely have over Marion's lessons, which, at Hurst, had always been so pleasant, and now and then she began to think that perhaps she was not educating the child quite so successfully as she liked to imagine. She was, however, ex-

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ceedingly angry at finding that Miss Damer had interfered with her theories.

"Now, Marion, attention; nine times seven," she began one day, as scholar and teacher sat together in the honeysuckle arbour.

"Sixty-three," cried Marion directly, "and there's a bumble-bee on your hair, sister."

"Never mind the bee. Tell me how you found the answer—you hadn't time to work it out. How can you be *sure* it is right?"

"Because it's in Aunt Joan's little green book, and I learnt it. I like her way better than yours, Cis."

Cicely was very indignant.

"Pray what else has Aunt Joan taught you?" she asked; "and when do you do lessons with her? I thought you liked to learn of me, Marion?"

"So I do; but last week you were busy doing French all day, and it was so hot, and Aunt Joan said she'd teach me as she was taught when she was a little girl, and I thought it would be fun. It's *much* easier than your way, Cis. You just learn it all off, and then you know it's

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handy when you have to do a sum; much less trouble than working it out. Auntie says working it out is new-fangled nonsense."

"Whatever it may be, it is the way in which I choose you to learn; so now pay attention, and prove to me that seven nines *are* sixty-three."

"You didn't say *seven nines;* you said nine times seven, and that's in the *nines*, not in the *sevens*."

"What utter rubbish!" exclaimed Cicely, "and I have tried to guard you against it—mere parrot learning. Now, once for all, Marion, ten sevens are seventy, therefore nine being one less than ten ——"

"*My* brains wouldn't stand it, I know that," broke in the voice of Phillis from the other side of the wall. "Is it possible you understand it yourself, Cicely? it is perfectly dreadful!"

Marion capered about on the grass in triumph, and Cicely took advantage of Phillis' appearance to attack her upon the subject of French irregular verbs. Phillis said her friend's progress in French was simply alarming, considering how new

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the study was to her; and while the two heads met over the grammar laid out on the top of the wall, Marion availed herself of the opportunity to steal plums. Bertram, after vainly trying to reach the plums himself, ran to his elder sister to tell tales; and Miss Joan, happening to look from her window at that moment, called to the little girl to let the fruit alone.

"It won't hurt her, aunt," said Cicely, looking carelessly round; upon hearing which Marion boldly went on gathering and eating.

"Possibly the fruit may *not* hurt her," observed Miss Joan, dryly; "but direct disobedience will. Child, come away from them at once. When I was your age little girls were punished for stealing—take care that I do not punish you."

Marion let fall her booty, and retreated from the plum-trees, but Cicely flamed up.

"If you have any complaint to make of my sister, Aunt Joan, I will correct her. I am sorry she should be troublesome to you, but you know it is not my wish that any of us——" Miss Joan had disappeared from the window, there was no one to be impressed by Cicely's speech, so she

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brought it to an abrupt conclusion, and returned to the verbs. Phillis was laughing.

"I am glad you are amused," remarked Cicely; "but in my place you would not find her so amusing: it occurs too often."

"I beg your pardon! I was not laughing at Miss Damer, but at—you!" and with the last word Phillis let herself drop to the ground upon their own side of the wall, and crouched at its foot, looking up with a comical gesture of terror at the flushed face of Cicely.

Yes, these scenes occurred often, far too often; but Cicely intended only to avail herself of the teaching of her new friends, that she might be better able to be of use to Mrs. Maxwell; and telling herself that it was all for the children's good in the end, and that when once she had Marion to herself again, she would soon bring her into order, she indulged them more than ever, and continued to look forward to her favourite vision of independence. But, meantime, a new trouble arose. Her one and only dress was fast wearing out, and she had no money with which to replace it. Miss Damer, unused to young girls,

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or to the care of their wardrobes, seemed never to notice that her niece still wore every day the paramatta dress, with its deep crape trimmings, that had been new for the funeral. Other mourning for common wear had of course been ordered; but Cicely, in her first flash of indignation at finding her aunt would have to pay the bills, had counter-ordered it, and so, although Martha had been provided with materials for the children, Cicely herself had nothing but the unfortunate paramatta. She could not bring herself to apply to Miss Damer, and took counsel with Ellen, the only one of the Ward girls who sympathised with her wish for independence.

"I don't know what you can do," she said, as the girls paced up and down the lawn together. "Here is another rent in the stuff—comes of getting over the wall, I fear—and the crape is getting quite rusty. I wonder Miss Damer does not *see* that you need a new dress."

"Perhaps she does, but she knows I will never be a burden."

"When you go to Mrs. Maxwell, you will, of course, let her fit you out?"

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"Of course! but that is not the same thing; I shall repay *her* by my services in the school. I am only waiting till I feel sure of being able to teach the little ones French, then I shall write at once."

"What progress you have made!" sighed Ellen, who was inclined to be idle herself, and secretly thought Cicely's French a bore. "I wish I was as clever; and how I envy you the noble career before you! Work for anyone one loves seems such happiness; to be necessary to them must be delightful!"

"Yes, the future is clear enough to me; but, meantime, I shall soon be in rags at this rate, and then Aunt Joan will tell me how neatly she was dressed when she was my age. Oh, Ellen! sometimes I think if she'd only never been 'my age' at all, I really could get on with her very well. You can't think how trying it is."

Ellen opened her large blue eyes. She was rather slow at understanding any but a very literal remark; her arm was round Cicely's waist, and her fingers playing with the watch-chain

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which was fastened at her belt; the touch of the chain suggested an idea.

"Cicely!"

"Well? you look as if you had thought of something—what is it?"

"You could get new things if you liked—plenty, and be a burden to no one. You might even buy your outfit for Mrs. Maxwell's."

"How? I should be eternally indebted to you if you will tell me how."

"Why, your watch—and then those lovely ornaments you showed me upstairs. You could sell them in Southampton. We might go in together in the pony carriage, sell the jewels, and do the shopping all at once, and no one be any the wiser."

Cicely looked thoughtful.

"The *watch* is mine," she said; "darling uncle gave it me, and I have other presents of his upstairs; but those I showed you were my mother's. When we were worst off she would not sell them, because of me and Marion, and I don't feel as if *I* had any right to part with them."

"But what did she think you and Marion would

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do with them? Hardly wear them when she knew you would be left dependent. Don't you fancy she may have looked to just such a time as this, a time when selling them would be of use to you?"

Ellen felt a little as though her friend was the heroine of a story which she wished to read to the end, and would be sorry to have interrupted. It would be interesting for the heroine in distress to sell her mother's jewels, very common-place for her to ask her aunt for a new dress.

The end of it was that the two girls went upstairs to Cicely's room, and the ornaments were brought out. After long discussions and much changing of her mind, Cicely fixed upon a diamond ring of her mother's, and one or two brooches of less value. The watch, indeed, all her uncle's gifts, were endeared to her by associations with the giver; but she had never seen her mother wear the ring or any ornaments at all, and felt no pain at thought of parting with them—no pain, but now and then a slight misgiving as to whether it was *right* to do so.

"But I have no one to advise me—only you,

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darling," she said, kissing Ellen's cheek, as she leant over the jewel-box. "Constance does not understand me, and Phillis laughs at everything."

Ellen blushed, and her conscience forced her to say that Constance would recommend consulting her mother.

"And, of course, you can do so; that is, if Miss Damer is to know, too; if she is *not* to know, it is impossible to tell mama."

"Oh, *quite* impossible!" exclaimed Cicely.

It was no unusual thing for the girls to drive into Southampton by themselves, but on this particular afternoon it required more manœuvring to carry out their project than Cicely liked. First Constance wished to be of the party—she had commissions to do for her mother which she would entrust to no one else, and when she had been persuaded that it was too hot for her to drive, as the sun always gave her a headache, Phillis joyfully proposed that she should take her elder sister's vacant place, and that instead of the dusty highroad they should go in the forest. Cicely was going to explain that she had shopping to do, when Ellen pulled her sleeve, and she remembered that they

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all knew she had no money. She walked apart from the others, and had half decided to give up her plan, when her coadjutor rejoined her.

"It is all right," she said; "I told the girls Miss Joan wanted her books changed at the library."

"I *hate* underhand ways! Why can't we say we have a secret?"

"You don't know Phill! she'd give me no peace."

"Well, what must be, must!" said Cicely with a sigh, as she went to fetch her hat.

Miss Damer's horse was lame, and it was Mrs. Ward's pony-carriage that the girls drove in.

"It is very inconvenient having only one horse to depend upon," Cicely had remarked as she took her place, and giving a tender thought to Ruby, Diamond, Lady Bess, and the carriage-horses in the far-away stables at Hurst. She had not addressed the remark to any one in particular, but Miss Joan's old gardener, who stood at the pony's head, made answer.

"It *be* ill-convenient, miss; but when there's more mouths in the house, there must be fewer

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mouths in the stables. T'aint so long ago since my mistress had a pair—and a coachman, too; not but what I can do without *him* well enough."

"You hear!" muttered Cicely, as she and Ellen started; "the very servants taunt me with my dependence!"

Phillis would have laughed, but Ellen could only exclaim,—

"Oh, Cis! Jacob says what he likes. We never mind him, and he didn't mean it for a taunt; only by way of praising Miss Damer."

"I didn't know she had made any difference for us," said Cicely, rather softened at the thought. "I daresay she misses her coachman and pair of horses; but, then, she seems really to *prefer* walking. She has given up what she cares little about, to secure authority, which she cares for a great deal." And having thus settled Miss Damer's affairs for her, she dismissed from her mind the sacrifice her aunt had made, and began once more to dwell upon the sacrifice she was about to make herself—the jewels which she did not value, and which were to be given up for the sake of independent action, which she valued so dearly!

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Assuredly Phillis would have alluded to "glass-houses;" but Ellen, if she remembered the proverb, had too much respect for her "heroine" to mention it. The drive was not quite as pleasant as Ellen had expected. Cicely would not talk of her schemes, not even of Hurst, or of the very distant days of her childhood before she went there. She insisted upon enlivening the way by the repetition of La Fontaine's fables, and by conversing in French to improve her pronunciation.

"I have no time to lose," she said, "and a great deal may be done in six weeks. Why, Mrs. Maxwell herself, when she was young and teaching as daily governess in London, shut herself up in an attic one holidays, with Ollendorff's Method for learning German — only for six weeks, and how do you think it ended?"

"Only that I know she is alive, I should say it ended in her going mad and dying. If there's a thing I hate, it's Ollendorff's 'Have you the blue jacket of the dead dog of the neighbour's good son?'—enough to turn any brain!"

"She came out," said Cicely with severe gravity,

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"she came out of that attic able to teach German, and to get sixty pounds a year instead of thirty. Why shouldn't I do the same?"

"Because we don't keep Ollendorff, thank goodness, and you haven't an attic to shut yourself in," answered Ellen, as usual taking the remark literally. She was getting rather cross. Clouds of dust enveloped the low phaeton and settled upon Cicely's crape and Ellen's own striped cambric, the sun beat down upon the road, the pony was lazy, and by the time they entered the town and drove under the quaint old bar towards the inn where they were in the habit of putting up the pony, misgivings had arisen of the wisdom of the whole proceeding. What would the tradespeople think of two young ladies coming alone to sell a diamond ring? If they went to one to whom the Wards or Miss Damer were strangers, they ran risk of being cheated; and if to the jeweller they employed, it would never do to stoop to ask him not to mention the matter.

"I don't wish to conceal it," cried Cicely, hotly. "You mistake me, Ellen. I would not do what I should not like to have known after it is

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done. I only feared interference before my plan was carried out. *Pray* say nothing of secresy. I shall not mention it to *anyone* unless I am asked questions, then I shall give plain answers, and I wish you to do the same."

"To give plain answers? I shall have to do that directly. Phillis will come upon me open-mouthed as soon as we are home."

"Well, hold your tongue till you are spoken to, and then tell the truth," said Cicely, rather impatiently, as they turned into the jeweller's shop.

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CHAPTER VI.

STONY CROSS.

"THIRTY-FIVE guineas!"

"Well, ma'am, from that to forty-five; I should say that would be the outside. The setting is rare and old-fashioned, and as a curiosity you might find a purchaser willing to give more for it, but in the regular way of trade it is only the value of the stones that would be paid."

The shopman spoke as if excusing the lowness of his offer for the diamond ring, but Cicely's exclamation had been one of surprise at the amount named. What could she not do with five-and-thirty pounds! The sum seemed inexhaustible in her eyes. She was quite ready to accede to the jeweller's proposal that the ring should be left with him to value, and the money called for in a few days. If he found the stones worth more than he had at first thought, the

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young lady might trust to him to give it, and meantime he would write a memorandum, acknowledging to having had the ring left with him. "Perhaps Mrs. Ward herself, or Miss Damer, would be in town this week or next?" and as he asked the question the man gave a searching look at the pair of young girls standing at his counter. He was in reality far too wise to transact such a piece of business with them alone, but that idea occurred to neither of them. Cicely explained that neither Mrs. Ward nor Miss Damer had any voice in the matter; that the ring was her property, and she herself merely staying with Miss Damer for a short time. It was easy to dispose of the brooches, which he had no qualms of conscience in paying for on the spot, and the girls left the shop with nearly five pounds in money, more than enough for Cicely's present purpose, and the receipt for the diamonds.

Shopping went on smoothly enough now; the materials for a dress, and one or two other things Cicely stood in need of, were chosen, and the drive home was far more cheerful than that into Southampton. Nor were they troubled with

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questions on their return. At the garden-gate of Miss Joan's pretty house, standing almost *in* the forest, Phillis was on the look-out for them to beg Cicely to get out there, and to desire her sister to hurry home with the pony-carriage.

"There is a telegram," she explained; "grandpapa is very ill, and mother has to go to him at once. There is just time to catch the train—she is waiting to get into the carriage. What *did* keep you so long? we thought you would never be home in time!"

"Lucky we were not miles away in the forest," said Ellen, as she touched the old pony with the whip; "we should not have been back till evening if we had done as *you* wished, Phillis."

Cicely was left standing at the gate as the two sisters drove round to Mrs. Ward's door. She was sorry trouble should come near her friends, but glad that other interests would prevent their having any curiosity as to the mysterious expedition into Southampton. She felt that she had really taken the first step towards her goal. It was in her own power now—or would be as soon as the ring was paid for—to

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relieve her aunt of all care for herself and the two children, by setting off at once, and at her own expense, to London, where Mrs. Maxwell lived. She made no doubt of her welcome there, still less of her fitness for the post she aspired to; but the real secret of the satisfaction expressed on her countenance, and the wonderfully contented frame of mind she rejoiced in just then, was that she had succeeded in a piece of independent action, in carrying out a plan Miss Joan knew nothing of. As for that good lady, she was much pleased at the bright looks of her niece, and the amiable mood in which she found her. The evening was by far the most agreeable they had passed together. Cicely displayed her French exercises, and claimed her aunt's congratulations on her rapid progress, and grew really interested in all Miss Damer told her of the literature of France; she had had no idea her aunt cared for such things, or was so well read, either in her own or any other language, as was evidently the case. It was quite late when they separated for the night. The moon was high above the trees in the forest, making their leafy

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branches look like silver, and throwing black shadows at their feet. The window in Cicely's room was wide open.

"Is that quite prudent, my dear?" asked Miss Joan, as she stood at the door and saw the moonbeams resting on Marion's bed.

"She has slept with her window open ever since she was born," answered Cicely.

"But you are not used to the forest, Cicely. Do you see the white mist rising here and there? After very warm days it creeps up and envelopes the whole house at night. It cannot be wholesome for the child."

"She seems quite well," said Cicely; but she felt more willing to be guided than usual, and Marion was precious to her. Miss Damer was relieved to see the window pushed up all but an inch at the top, and Cicely's kiss was warmer than usual when she bade her good night.

That afternoon Mrs. Ward had given many charges to her girls. Constance had begged hard to go with her mother.

"You know how it will be," she said; "you will wear yourself out for other people, and no

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one will take of you, mother. I am very, very sorry for dear grandpapa, and for poor little Aunt Jane, but I *must* think first of you, and I want to come and protect you."

Mrs. Ward smiled through her tears, but said she could not leave the other two without Constance, and it was impossible for all to go. She spoke rather anxiously of Ellen.

"I wish nothing had called me from you till I had seen her safely through this new admiration fit; but it is of no use wishing, and I can't hope to be at hand to guide her through *all* her attacks of friendship at first sight. Perhaps it is as well she should be left to guide herself this time; but you will bear with her, dear, and be on the look-out for the reaction, I know."

"Cicely is a superior girl; I should think she would do Ellen good; and I know Miss Damer thinks Ellen is to do Cis good, so it is all right. Perhaps the reaction may not come at all this time."

"If it does, remember I look to you to keep the peace. I leave you in charge, Constance, but in any matter in which you are *in doubt* as to

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my wishes, consult Miss Damer, and follow her advice."

"Isn't that leaving *her* in charge, mother?"

"Darling, no; I trust you implicitly: I only mean in any case where you are not *sure* of what I should wish."

It was rather a dull evening for the three sisters. Constance was occupied with some bills and memoranda her mother had left for her to attend to. She could just as well have gone through them the next morning, and it would have been better to devote her evening to the others, but she felt out of spirits and thought occupation would act as a restorative. Phillis was too unsettled, she said, to fix her attention to anything. She wandered in and out of the open window till Constance called to her to beware of the rising mist, and then came in to distract her sister by playing a few bars at a time of every piece she knew, finishing none, and talking all the time she played. Ellen sat by the window watching the moonlight, and now and then crying softly, she hardly knew why; and when Phillis found it out and remonstrated with her

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on the ground that their mother had told them to keep cheerful, and after all crying could do no good, Ellen drew near to the table where Constance was writing by the lamp-light, and employed herself in pencilling a note to Cicely, regardless of Phillis—

"Well, I *do* call that silly! You have been *tête-à-tête* all day; or is it an 'Ode to Friendship,' not a letter at all?"

The following day was hotter than ever.

"It is to be hoped the vipers enjoy it," Phillis said, fanning herself with the *Times* newspaper, as she stood in the window after breakfast; "only ten o'clock, and as hot as noon. There's not a breath of air, and here comes Cicely, suffocated, I'm sure. What would you give for a breeze from your Sussex Downs to-day?" she asked, as Cicely leaned back in the low seat she had chosen, and looked quite overcome with the exertion of crossing the two gardens. She held a bundle of scribbled papers in her hands.

"*Not* exercises! don't tell me so!" cried Phillis, in pretended dismay.

"I've been up since five o'clock," said Cicely;

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"it was cool and fresh; you can't think *how* cool, and a sweet, low breeze whispering all over the forest, every little leaf bathed in dew. And then the birds—I don't think I ever heard birds sing till I came here, and yet I'd give them all for the whistle of one thrush at Hurst."

"And this is your morning's work?" asked Phillis. "I respect you, I do indeed; but don't expect me to emulate your bright example. I thought *we* were tolerable workers,—such was the delusion I lived under till I made your acquaintance."

"You are paying for it now," said Ellen, as she stooped over Cicely and kissed her brow; "you will wear yourself out."

"*Voilà le Français gagné*," exclaimed Constance, nodding to her pupil, as she glanced over the written sheets.

"See, 'Shirley,'" put in Phillis, parenthetically.

"But there are heaps of mistakes, I'm sure," and Cicely sat upright and pushed back her hair, looking quite ready to re-write her composition on the spot.

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"It's too pretty to pull to pieces or to see mistakes in," answered Constance; "listen, sisters, it is just a description of this very morning — 'Five o'clock in the forest,' she calls it." She read a few sentences, to which Ellen listened with wrapt attention, till Phillis interrupted with —

"Adjectives should agree with their nouns," upon which Cicely sprang up and insisted upon Constance's whole attention being given to her and her lesson.

"We *must* have some fresh air," exclaimed Ellen later, when she had idled away an hour over the newspaper, which she never read when her mother was at home; not because it was forbidden, or even supposed to be against her mother's wishes that the girls should read it, but simply because occupations succeeded each other so pleasantly and naturally that there never seemed any of those stray hours to waste upon the columns of the *Times*,— hours that hung a little heavily on hand in Mrs. Ward's absence. Then, too, as she herself always read out the leading articles or anything of particular interest, there was no need to be at the trouble of reading the paper for themselves. Ellen

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did not feel her spirits much raised by her study of the police reports, and secretly wished that Miss Damer had found her doing almost anything else than reading them, when she came to see what the girls were about.

"Interfering!" Ellen whispered to Cicely, who was still battling with nouns, adverbs, and relative pronouns. But Miss Joan had come in kindness to offer her horse and carriage if the girls liked to drive up to Stony Cross, and pic-nic there. Old Jacob pronounced the grey fit to use, and the Wards' own pony having been twice into Southampton the day before must of course have rest.

"The children are suffering with the heat, my dear," she said to Cicely; "and if you four girls go, I think you might manage Marion between you, and let little Bertram sit with Jacob."

It was certain that there would be no fresh air to be had in the forest that day until the low breeze Cicely had spoken of came again to whisper its evensong to the trees,—no fresh air, that is to say, nearer than Stony Cross, for the forest was there also, but it lay high, so high

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that one looked down upon the tree-tops, which spread out their green masses as far as eye could see in one direction, while in the other the coasts of "the island" were just visible, and a silvery line of sea. The girls knew how fresh and sweet the sea-breeze would feel up there, and joyfully welcomed the proposal. Cicely had the grace to ask how her aunt herself would spend the glowing summer day, and Miss Joan was pleased at the attention, but said that she was never at a loss for occupation, and they need not think of her.

How pleasant was the drive that hot day, along the beautiful roads, now under the shade of trees, now crossing wide, park-like spaces, with a whole billowy sea of green fern in the distance, and coming out at last upon the higher ground. They drove past the house of Purkis, the charcoal-burner, who carried away the body of William Rufus in a cart, after the king had been slain by Sir Walter Tyrrel's arrow. Cicely stared to see the name of Purkis still over the door, though now-a-days the representative of the family did not burn charcoal; but historical enthusiasm did not

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prevent her from expatiating upon the new light thrown upon history by modern research. The arrow was no accidental shot, she told them, and explained the state of politics at that time in England; neither, according to her, was Sir Walter the man. Phillis stood up for the old story of her childhood, exactly as it was related in the painted "book of kings" from which her first ideas of English history had been gleaned, and repeated the old doggrel verses she had learned so long ago. They "debated" the matter warmly, till Marion declared "it was a shame to do lessons out-of-doors." The carriage was sent on to a little roadside inn, when it had deposited the girls and Miss Damer's hamper of good things near the old stone marking the place where the red king fell, and there the cloth was spread in spite of Cicely's fears. She saw a viper in every brown stick, and heard them creeping in the grass at every slight rustle amongst the leaves. However, the sketch-books were produced, and Phillis claimed her lesson. She was making great progress, and sketching and botany went on well together; while Marion and Bertie

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played about, and Ellen sat in the shade writing poetry.

These girls had fine appetites; neither Cicely's ambition nor Ellen's sentiment interfered with dinner. Miss Joan's chicken-pie was followed by quantities of gingerbread and little cakes, and a store of ripe plums. The repast did not choke her niece by any means; albeit, she held forth eloquently upon the subject of her future while she ate.

"Why *should* we all be so good and useful?" asked Phillis. "I'm sure the days go by happily; we do no harm, we study and enjoy ourselves, and the present is enough for me. I suppose I have not a 'high soul;' not so tall as Ellen's or yours, Cicely."

Constance thought it was only natural to dream dreams, and make plans for the future, and that the present, bright as it was, would be very dreary without the wide, fair prospect they saw from it.

"And yours is such a noble ambition," said Ellen, using her favourite expression; "to have

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a fixed purpose must make life seem so much more real. Have more plums, Cicely?"

Cicely nodded; a mouthful of gingerbread impeded her grand utterances for the moment.

"There is so much dreaming, so little doing," remarked Phillis, helping herself to cake.

"All the better," observed Constance, sitting serene and quiet in her white dress, while the children stuck fern-leaves in her hair; "it is so well that life *does* go on in spite of us. I mean the days do not stand still for us to dream in. Look at Cicely here, while she dreams and plans, fears and hopes, for the future, her *present* is quite different—just a happy daily life like our own, and it is that which forms character and grows to be the real life to which by-and-by we shall look back."

"*That?*" questioned Cicely, who was struck by the idea. "I don't quite see what you mean."

"Why our *real* life—what we *do*, not what we mean to do—how our time passes *now*, not how we intend it to pass by-and-by. You have been here six weeks, Cicely."

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"I keep my end in view," said Cicely, seriously, and still devoted to gingerbread and plums. She had left her new dress with Martha to be made up, and bits of fern, dead leaves, long-legged insects of all sorts, were entangled in the deep crape of her paramatta. Seeing which Constance advised her to untrim it on their return. She said the crape might well be a little less deep now, and at the words Cicely burst into tears, to the dismay of her companions. She laughed at herself the next moment. It mattered so little how deep or how narrow the crape on a mourning dress was, she should *feel* the same in colours: and when the time came to leave off her black altogether, she was sure she would be as loth to do it as she was now to untrim her first mourning dress. This little episode seemed to have banished the thoughts of the future which had occupied them just before. The three sisters, who had sweet voices and good ears, began to sing, and Cicely listened entranced. Song succeeded song, and as the last notes of one of the Irish melodies died softly away, old Jacob was seen beckoning to them from the top of the

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wooded hill. He had no intention of climbing down only to be sent up again, and wished to know if the young ladies were ready to have the hamper repacked and carried up to the carriage. Constance thought it was time to go, but behold! both children were missing!

Cicely was in an agony at once, but a very short search led to the discovery of the runaways, who it appeared had carried off the remains of the feast, to eat in secret. Marion flew into a violent passion when the fruit was taken from her, and the little boy declared he had none of it, although his pockets were stuffed out with plums, the juice of which was staining his brown holland suit. Cicely was intensely vexed. She could not help seeing plainly in Constance's face that she was thinking a little more care to bring up the children well now, would be worth all Cicely's plans for their future welfare. She hardly spoke as they drove home, and felt as if the day had been a failure. After the great heat the white mist came creeping all over the forest at night, wreathing amongst the trees, and penetrating everywhere. Miss Joan declared she

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would take them all away for change of air if this weather continued; but at midnight Cicely was awoke by crashing peals of thunder, broad flashes of lightning lit up her room, and little Marion, startled from sleep, began to cry and talk of "Uncle Bertram." Her sister saw the child had been dreaming of him; she took her into her own bed, and soothed her tenderly, while the storm died away, the peals of thunder grew fainter and fainter, and heavy summer rain poured down. The next day was fresh and lovely. The weight on the atmosphere was gone, there would be no more evening mists.

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CHAPTER VII.

THE "DEPENDENT ORPHAN" IN SOCIETY.

"YESTERDAY was a broken day," said Constance, at breakfast-time.

"I vote we break this one too," exclaimed Phillis, sipping her tea.

"It will distract our thoughts from poor dear grandpapa," sighed Ellen, helping herself to jam.

"No!" cried Constance, snapping the lock of the tea-caddy with great energy; "that is a wrong principle: steady attention to our usual daily duties is *the* thing to keep up our spirits."

"Is there no letter for me?" asked Ellen, plaintively. It was a question she was in the habit of putting daily, and it always provoked Phillis.

"Do listen to her," she said. "Of course there's no letter for you, or it would be given

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to you at once. We can't hear from mother till to-morrow. *I* think Constance is right. It is my week at the school, and I shall go there; I shall also finish Mr. Freeman's essays, and colour the sketch I took yesterday."

"*I* have the house-linen to look over, and a quantity of plain work to do," said Constance.

"And I suppose I may as well practise hard," said Ellen, who was less idle about her music than about anything else; "and then there is mother to be written to."

Laudable resolves, and by rights it should have been a well-spent day; but about eleven o'clock in walked a neighbour, with an urgent request to the girls to join an impromptu croquet-party. It was, though impromptu, to be rather a gay affair, and to wind up with a dance in the evening. At first hearing of it, Constance unhesitatingly declined, explaining the sad summons her mother had had, and the precarious state of her grandfather; but by the time the matter had been talked over a little, her scruples grew less and less, while both her sisters begged her to give way.

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"It will be very kind and neighbourly of you to come," said Miss Waring; "and you know, if you *really* think Mrs. Ward would not like you to stay, you can leave early, and not wait for the dancing."

Phillis suggested they should bring Cicely with them, and she and Ellen accompanied Janet Waring to give the invitation. The morning slipped away after that in chatting to Cicely, playing with the children, and helping Miss Joan to strike cuttings from her geraniums. Constance, who had resolutely carried out her scheme with regard to the house-linen, was rejoiced to hear that Miss Damer intended to drive her niece to the Warings herself, and settled in her own mind that the stay there of herself and her sisters should depend upon Miss Joan's arrangements for Cicely.

It was Cicely's first introduction to the neighbourhood, and Ellen was in a fever of excitement about her beautiful friend, who had declared if there was a thing on earth she disliked it was a croquet-party, but had consented to go purely to oblige Ellen. The Wards arrived first, and

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Ellen could hardly be civil, so intently did she watch for Miss Damer's carriage. Constance and Phillis were carried off at once to join a game, but Ellen was determined her friend should find some one disengaged and ready to talk to her besides the old ladies, the mamas and chaperons who sat under the trees looking on. She declined playing, and stood in the shade still watching for Cicely's arrival. The Warings were a large party, and Janet herself and two schoolboy brothers were obliged to resign their mallets to new arrivals. The boys joined Ellen under her tree. She was a favourite of theirs; her soft, gentle manners and pretty face made her popular. She was always ready to listen to other people, was one of the best croquet-players at the frequent gatherings round the neighbourhood, and danced well. These boys were great allies and constant partners of hers. She was not sorry they had been obliged to leave the game, so that Cicely would see her attended by her two faithful squires, and was more than ever glad she was not "chained to a mallet" herself. Leonard began to question her about her new neighbour.

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"What sort is she?" he asked; "jolly? or prim? Will she be *an acquisition?* that's always the first question the old ladies ask when any one new comes to live here."

"Jolly! oh, no! she is an orphan, you know, and dependent."

"Dear, dear! sentimental then I suppose—with a 'trial,' and all that sort of thing! What makes her come out if she is not jolly?"

"She tries to keep up her spirits of course," said Ellen; "she is *not* sentimental, Leonard. She only feels her position, and she is very, very lovely."

"One of Ellen's 'geese,' I suspect," remarked Francis, laughing. "I warn you I shall not dance with her, though I see she is the very swanniest goose you ever set up yet."

"Very, very lovely!" repeated Leonard; "then I shall content myself with looking at her. Those lovely girls are only fit to be looked at. Can she talk?"

"She is the most clever girl I ever met," said Ellen, giving with every word she uttered a more and more false impression of poor Cicely;

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"quite a superior person. She has high plans for the future, is quite above being a burden on her aunt, and then she educates her little sister entirely herself."

"Blue! what could possess Janet to ask her?" exclaimed Francis.

"Lovely — superior — educates a sister — feels her position — makes heroic efforts to keep up her spirits," summed up Leonard. "No, thank you, Ellen, don't introduce me. How many dances are you going to give me yourself? Let me see, I think I shall dance alternately with you and Constance all the evening, and Frank may have Phillis."

"Leonard," said Ellen, gravely, "you *must* like my friend. I am not at liberty to tell you her secrets of course; if I might you would see how noble she is. And then I want her to be happy to-day: she came only to please me — so sweet of her to make the effort ——"

"Say, to make the 'sacrifice to friendship,'" put in Leonard; "sounds better. How do Miss Damer and your heroine get on together?"

"Oh, Miss Damer is so dry and unsympa

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thetic! She is very kind of course, but she does not understand Cicely; that prim, cold manner of hers ——"

"Hollo!" exclaimed Francis; "surely I remember when that goose was a swan too? I thought you were fond of Miss Joan?"

"So I am!" Ellen blushed as she spoke; "we all are: but *we* have a happy home—friends—each other; my poor Cis has *nothing:* she is alone—poor—dependent—an orphan—what wonder that life seems sad to her, and that when Miss Damer is kindest she should still miss the uncle she adored—when we are happiest *she* should be mournful?"

"Very mournful," observed Leonard, in a peculiar tone; "life seems sad indeed!" He was looking away from Ellen, and watching the approach of a group slowly advancing towards the house. Cicely, her face radiant with smiles, and evidently, by her animated gestures, describing some amusing adventure, walked beside Mr. Waring, who was laughing heartily at her recital; while on his arm was Miss Joan, also laughing, now and then nodding to her niece as she ap-

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pealed to her to corroborate her story, now and then joining in with some explanation of her own. Halfway between the house and the lawn they all stood still. Ellen could hear the tones of Cicely's voice. Her hands were full of wild flowers, bunches of scarlet poppies and blue corn-flower, and great fern-leaves; they showed well against her black dress. She had a brilliant colour, and her fair hair was in rather picturesque confusion.

"I do like to succeed—to carry out a plan that has once been settled," she was saying, "and Aunt Joan was so good, but I'm afraid she must be awfully tired. Couldn't you find her a seat in the shade, Mr. Waring, and if there is tea or anything going about?" She was making herself quite at home.

"Tea, to be sure! tea, iced claret cup—here you with the tray!" began Mr. Waring, fussily beckoning to a footman who just then came out of the house with a tray of refreshments; "he is not my own servant," he explained; "there are so many to-day. Now, Miss Damer, what may I give you?"

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At that moment Cicely caught sight of Ellen, and came up to her.

"Just fancy," she began, "the grey ran away! the old grey, the lame horse! he did indeed, and Jacob was so angry; and, I believe, Aunt Joan thinks it was my fault."

"Your fault?" said Leonard, offering her a chair as he spoke.

"Thanks! yes; you see, the first day I ever saw Aunt Joan my ponies had run away with me, and, I believe, she thinks it is something about me makes horses gay, for *her* horse never did such a thing in his life before. Jacob had got down to open a gate, and something frightened the poor thing, and off he set."

"Was there an upset?"

"Upset! goodness, no! Jacob's hand was on the carriage all the time. I find that is what is called running away in these parts. But the end of it was the grey hurt himself, and was so dead lame we had to send him home and walk on. Oh, dear! I'm tired of laughing," and Cicely threw herself back in her chair. "Jacob *scolded* us so; I can't imagine why."

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"How well she does it!" whispered Francis to Ellen.

"Does what?" asked Ellen, sharply.

"Why, the 'painful effort;' keeping up her spirits, you know."

"Not playing?" asked Cicely, glancing round upon the pretty lawn, large enough for several games at once, and where the amicable warfare was waging hotly. "I knew *I* should be too late to join a party, and resigned myself to idleness, but you were in time. Ah! I see Phill and Constance. How pretty it looks! Don't you play?" she added, turning to Leonard.

"I thought you hated croquet?" said Ellen, rather crossly.

Cicely coloured.

"I don't think you need have made that remark; and, moreover, it was croquet-*parties* I said I disliked, not croquet-playing."

"You are very candid," said Leonard, laughing. "I'm sorry you victimized yourself to come to us if you dislike it; but it would have been too bad to stay away." He had seated himself at

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her feet on the grass, and was looking up at her in undisguised admiration.

"Oh! are you a Waring, then?" she asked. "Ellen should have introduced me; but, I'm sure, you are not offended, and as for playing, when one *is* at a party, I'd rather play than sit and talk with the old ladies."

"*We* are not old ladies," put in Francis, coming round from the back of Ellen's chair, and taking a place by his brother.

"No, and I like this — I'm used to boys! Oh, Ellen, I used to have such matches with the Bennington boys! Ralph plays beautifully."

"Who's Ralph?" asked Leonard; "don't say anything about Ralph now, please?"

"Why not?" Cicely opened her eyes.

"Oh, because Leonard is a much prettier name, and I want you to tell me about the ponies that ran away with you — your own ponies."

Ellen was a little accustomed to monopolising the attention of her boy-friends; she felt rather aggrieved at the defection of Leonard and Francis, as they both devoted themselves to Cicely, who really seemed in her element, now chatting to

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them of past days at Hurst, now listening to their own adventures, or asking questions of their school-life, and accepting so merrily and frankly the homage paid to her. They got up a quiet game of their own by-and-by, and Ellen really felt in danger of losing her temper as her two squires left her for an instant choosing her mallet, while both tried to secure her friend for a partner. She stood knocking in the stick with its bright-coloured rings, and tried to get rid of her vexation, or, at least, not to show it, when Francis had to give way to his elder brother and return to her side. Consolation came in the fact that she was a much better player than Cicely, and her side beat; but, after all, the triumphs of winning a game at croquet did not compensate for the mortification of seeing her partner's whole attention given to overhearing the conversation between Cicely and his brother; a conversation which might have been general if Ellen only would have joined in it good-temperedly, and been content to be eclipsed by her friend. Boy-like, Francis was not in the least aware he neglected Ellen, only thought, which was quite true, that she was

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put out about something or other, and not so pleasant as usual. They had begun to play so late that they were left to themselves before the game was over; the rest of the world had all gone in to tea, and the carriages began to come round. Miss Joan came up to speak to Cicely.

"My dear, Lady Harmer is so good as to drive us home, but I fear she will stay very late; her daughters remain for the dance."

"The later the better, aunt; that is, as far as I am concerned."

"*We* are not going to remain," said Ellen.

"Oh, what a pity! I love dancing, and now you are once out, Aunt Joan, you won't mind staying, will you?"

"Feels her position cruelly," whispered Francis in Ellen's ear.

"You *can't* go, Ellen," whispered Leonard, on the other side; "for, you know, she came 'purely to oblige you.'"

"'Sacrifices to friendship,' like a trump," added Frank.

Phillis ran up to call Ellen to have something to eat.

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"We *are* going to stay," she cried. 'I'm sure I shall love the old grey for ever! If he had not run away, Miss Damer's own carriage would have taken her home; now she must wait till the Harmer girls have had enough dancing, whereby *we* shall dance too;" for Constance had fixed to do as Miss Damer did, and not leave till she left.

Constance was the only one of the Wards who was "out;" that is to say, she had dined at one or two houses in the neighbourhood, for at their own home there was no "out" or "in," no difference made between the sisters; but there *was* a difference on this evening, since "Miss Ward" had partners enough, while Phillis was obliged to content herself principally with girls of her own age, and Ellen secretly resented more and more the defection of her boy-friends, and sat apart and silent. Cicely was the gayest of the gay, and took for granted that every one else was as much amused as herself. Miss Joan looked on well pleased as the black paramatta frock flew round in a valse, and the tones of Cicely's laughter struck her ear.

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"I see amusement is good for girls," she remarked to Lady Harmer. "I suspect that they dance off a good deal of nonsense, and a great many high-flown notions. I am not sorry we came."

"Will you dance this, Ellen?" asked Francis, coming up to her as the valse began, and after an amicable contest between himself and Leonard to secure Cicely's hand, had been decided against him. Frank put his arm round her waist, in full confidence that she would agree, but Ellen drew back.

"You mean Cicely won't have you," she said. "No, thank you, Frank, I don't care to dance only with my friend's rejected partners."

"Nonsense! we engaged you before this young lady came; you know we did; and then you have no right to be angry with Leonard—he is only doing your bidding."

"*My* bidding?"

"Yes, you said he *must* like Miss Cicely; he obeys you as usual. You said you wished her to be happy to-day; he is doing his best to secure it."

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But Ellen would not smile, neither would she dance, but remained in offended dignity, while Frank sought Phillis, who was delighted to dance with him, though teasing him all the time for his admiration of the new comer.

Later in the evening Ellen left her quiet corner, and stole out upon the broad stone piazza running along the front of the house. Outside everything was very still and peaceful in the moonlight, and the air was heavy with the scent of heliotrope and mignonette; light streamed from the windows, and the sound of the music was softened by the folds of the heavy damask curtains. She could see the figures of the dancers as they passed and re-passed, and once Cicely and Leonard pausing to rest near the open window, Ellen could overhear their talk. Only a few merry words; the boy had asked some absurd riddle, which Cicely was trying to answer—anything more unlike the "high-souled heroine" of Ellen's fancy than her friend looked, it would have been hard to find. Ellen thought she heard her own name, and then the words, "cross about something or other—often is;" and as she turned away, for fear

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of overhearing more, hot tears sprang to her eyes. A moment after the music stopped, the valse was over, and Constance coming out on to the piazza with the gentleman with whom she had been dancing found Ellen there alone. The tone of her voice betrayed that something was amiss, but in answer to her sister's questions she merely said she was thinking of "poor dear grandpapa;" and, indeed, her thoughts *had* flown to the one sorrowful subject she knew of, for she found it convenient to attribute her low spirits to that, instead of to jealousy or ill-temper. A sudden sense struck Constance very uncomfortably—a sense of the different scene in which her mother might just then be taking part. She was glad to send Ellen away with Mr. Gresham to the supper-room, and the young man good-naturedly asked her to dance the next lancers, and after that introduced her to one or two more partners. Ellen recovered her spirits; she was young enough and silly enough to enjoy the triumph of dancing with "grown-up gentlemen," while her rival was only engaged by boys, but the enjoyment of Constance was over for the evening; she sat quietly

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by Miss Damer, and now and then regretted that they had stopped for the evening-party, and felt as if there was a possibility of their mother disliking them to do so. However, there was no help for it now. Their pony-carriage was to follow Lady Harmer's brougham; Miss Joan would not hear of allowing them to start by themselves, and the Miss Harmers had not had enough of dancing yet. They tired even Cicely out.

"Not another step!" she exclaimed, as Leonard and Frank and one or two other lads crowded round her. "I *couldn't* dance again to-night, and you, none of you, except Leonard, know how to valse: a bad partner is more fatiguing than walking ten miles; there, go and ask Phillis, she is never tired, I feel sure, and I believe we are all going immediately. See how few people there are left."

The carriages were coming round again now, and at last Cicely found herself with her hat and cloak on, and waiting only for the Wards' pony-carriage, which by some mistake was not there. Miss Damer was in a great state of anxiety; she disliked keeping Lady Harmer wait-

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ing, yet could by no means drive off without the certainty that Constance and her sisters were close behind. Messages were sent to the stables, and Cicely, standing in the doorway of the little study just then doing duty as cloak-room, had for the moment no better amusement than to listen to the conversation of Lady Harmer and Mrs. Waring, whose figures filled up the entrance and prevented her from making her escape. At first she did not imagine the conversation concerned her, but a few words attracted her attention.

"Perfect self-sacrifice!" Lady Harmer was saying; "that is what I call it."

"And self-sacrifice is a noble thing: it has been the same all her life."

"Yes; first with regard to her sister—this girl's mother—she was a mother to her herself in childhood, and until that disgraceful marriage broke her heart."

"A cruel return!" said Mrs. Waring.

"Indeed it was, and even after that to give up half her fortune when they were in great poverty; but I believe they did appreciate that."

"People who can appreciate no other sacrifice

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generally *over*-estimate the sacrifice of mere money."

"True. I only hope this girl will reward her better. Now again she has to make a sacrifice of means; what she has undertaken cannot be carried out for nothing."

Cicely began to have a vague idea that *she* might be "this girl," and was even about to question Mrs. Waring at once when she heard her name called; the two ladies moved away; Phillis was in the little phaeton; she and the Waring boys had run round to the stables themselves, and Leonard had put the pony to.

"We are all here, Miss Damer," cried Phillis, as Ellen and Constance got in beside her; "it is all right, I assure you, and what a lovely night."

"But, my dear, let me count; there should be three of you." Miss Joan stumbled round the carriage, giving each of the girls a tap with her parasol as she went, and satisfied at last, she entered the brougham, and they all drove off amidst the noisy leave-takings of the boys. Constance was surprised to find Ellen in unusually

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high spirits, she laughed and talked all the way home; but a few rather disparaging remarks she made upon her new friend's appearance and behaviour suggested the idea that the "reaction" was not far off.

"Cicely got on with everyone, and how nice she looked," said Phillis; "it is a pleasure to take people out who are so gay and sociable, and do one credit."

"She got on with the *boys*," observed Ellen; "I didn't see her dancing with anyone else; she is evidently used to schoolboys; that Ralph she talks so much about seems her beau-ideal; and as for looks, I was sorry she did not do herself justice, how *could* she in that old dress? and I had told Leonard she was lovely, one does not like to raise false expectations."

"There's Miss Joan's head again," cried Phillis, who was driving; and so there was; every now and then the good lady cast an anxious look behind, along the broad moonlit road, to see if the little carriage and the three girls were safely following.

Cicely's last thought that night was, "*Who* can

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'this girl' be? Is it possible that Aunt Joan sacrificed herself for my poor mother—loved her as I love Marion? Ah! if she did, she will surely understand that *I* wish to do the same;" and in her dreams she valsed with Mrs. Maxwell, while Leonard Waring and Miss Joan played croquet, and woke with a start, thinking she heard Lady Harmer cry, "Perfect self-sacrifice" just in her ear; but it turned out to be little Bertram, who had climbed upon her bed and was demanding the bon-bons she had promised to bring home to him from the croquet-party.

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CHAPTER VIII.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS.

"Now I wonder," thought Cicely as she sat watching her aunt's dry, grave manner, as, with account-books and bills on the little table before her, she held counsel with her cook one morning after breakfast; "now I do wonder if there is any secret history with regard to my mother and Aunt Joan; but no, if there had been she would understand and sympathise with me more than she does. Lady Harmer and Mrs. Waring must have been speaking of some one else. Those little wiry side curls she wears too; it's not possible it was her; and then, I should have heard of it. Or if she *did* help my mother it must been all from a sense of duty, just as she helps us, or *would* if I allowed it" (Cicely forgot how very completely she was "allowing" Miss Damer to help her); "no love, no warm-hearted affection, as there was

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with Uncle Bertram——" Screams from the garden broke in upon her soliloquy, and made Miss Joan jump.

Little Bertram was insisting upon climbing the wall just over Mrs. Ward's water-butt, where, as there were sometimes eight feet of water in it, he might easily be drowned; Martha was remonstrating, and Marion encouraging him.

"Come down directly, sir," called Miss Joan from the drawing-room window.

"Sister said he might," shouted Marion in reply.

"Nonsense!" and Cicely hastened to the spot. "I said he might climb, but not there; you might be drowned, dear child, and she held him up to look into the water.

"*You* get over," muttered the little boy, trying to wriggle away from her.

"Yes, but not just in this spot; see lower down, that is where you may climb, Bertie, not here."

"My dear, the only safe way is to forbid *any* climbing of this wall." Miss Damer came up as she spoke, and Bertram stood still to listen; "Now remember," she went on, "if I see you

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trying to get over here, or if I hear of you doing it, I will give you a good whipping."

The conclusion was so unexpected that it took the young rebel by surprise, but Miss Joan looked so very much as though she meant it, that he ventured on no defiance, and was slowly following Martha for his usual morning walk in the forest when Marion exclaimed—

"But you *can't* whip him, Auntie — Cicely won't let anyone punish us but herself, you know, and I am sure *she* won't beat us."

Miss Joan glanced at Cicely, who leaned against the wall, and by a great effort resisted the temptation to assure Marion that she was right.

"What I once say I will do, is always done, children: I advise Bertram to be an obedient boy, or he will be sorry for it."

The children left the garden and Miss Joan returned to the house. Cicely sat down in her favourite arbour to think. She was afraid her importance in the children's eyes would be lessened by seeming in any way to give up to another the authority over them, and at the same time conscious that her little brother was getting

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beyond her control, and that it would be better for him to be punished than drowned. However, she hoped the threat would be enough, and that the matter was decided now once for all. Yet when that evening Marion threw her arms round her neck, and coaxed her to say no one should interfere with "Cis's own motherless little ones," as she had taught her to speak of herself and her brother, Cicely could not, unwise as she felt it to be, resist pressing her to her heart and declaring *no one* should ever lay a finger upon either of them.

Ellen had brought her the thirty-five pounds from the Southampton jeweller that day, and the possession of the money gave her a strange feeling of liberty; it was now in her power to do so much which the mere want of funds would have prevented. Constance and Ellen had driven to Southampton together, and Ellen claimed Cicely's congratulations upon the clever manner in which she had contrived that her sister should know nothing of her business.

"She has not an idea what took me into the shop; I went there while she was choosing sauce-

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pans, and I managed it so well for you; no one would have guessed that I had all that money in my pocket as we drove home."

"How you do love a mystery," said Cicely; "so *missish* of you! I should like you to hear what Ralph Morland would say to this sort of thing. I thought I told you I had no objection in the world to Constance or anybody else knowing that I had sold the ring."

"But *I* have an objection."

"You! why, what business is it of yours?"

"Only that I was your messenger. I should hate to have them know that I put it into your head. Promise you will not tell."

"It may so happen that I shall be obliged to."

"It *could* not. I mean you have no need to say *ever* to *anyone* that I suggested it. I hope you will not, Cicely."

"For what reason?"

"Oh, Phillis would tease and say, I love mysteries, and they would be always suspecting I had a secret, and then——"

"Then what?"

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"I don't think Mama would like it; she'd say I ought to have made you consult her or tell Miss Damer."

"Made me! You speak as if you could make me do what you pleased! I bear the responsibility of my own actions, Ellen. Of course, I will not mention your name if you so much dislike it, but you have contrived to give a colour that *I* particularly dislike to the whole transaction; so mean and underhand, and there was no necessity for anything of the sort."

"No, of course there was not; you might have driven in with Miss Damer, and let her help you to drive a bargain; I wonder you did not."

Cicely and Ellen were very near a quarrel. Cicely provoked that she had been led into underhand ways, Ellen vexed that her friendly offices were not appreciated as she felt they deserved to be. The two girls separated, each displeased with the other, and after the children were gone to bed Cicely came to sit by her aunt's table, instead of taking up her usual position near the window. She began to have a vague idea that a grown-up friend might be a better one than a silly girl of

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her own age, and it had almost dawned upon her that perhaps she did not quite understand Miss Joan, or know the full extent of all her obligations to her. Certainly, when she set herself to think of the past, all she did know of it amounted to very little, there was plenty of room for imagination. She had been only ten years old when she went to live at Hurst, and though she thought she remembered a great deal before that, she knew that it was only probable that her remembrance was dim and untrustworthy.

"You used to send hampers, I know that," she exclaimed, abruptly, and after a long pause, during which Miss Joan's knitting-pins, as they touched each other, had made the only sound in the room.

"My dear!—hampers?"—the good lady was startled, and did not understand.

"I mean when we were poor, and papa was alive. I distinctly remember big hampers, and mama crying one day when we found ducks in them. I remember the ducks, too; how good they were!"

Miss Damer frowned over her ribbed grey

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stocking; the stocking destined at Christmas to grace the leg of Jacob the gardener.

"That is a time I do not like to think of, Cicely; it is not pleasant to me to be reminded of it."

"Isn't it a little pleasant to be reminded of how dear mama appreciated your kindness, Aunt Joan; so different from my other aunts, or Mr. Peter?"

"You cannot possibly remember anything about it, Cicely."

"What *did* we live on then?" persisted Cicely, knitting her brows in the effort to search her memory; "papa was ill, and we had no servants; mama and I made the beds, and I used to run out on errands."

"This is very disagreeable, this subject you have chosen, with which to enliven our evening," said Miss Damer, impatiently. "Understand once for all, my dear, it is not a subject on which I choose you to address me, or to afford me information. You were a mere child at the time, your impressions are not to be trusted; but that young girls of the present day should mistrust

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themselves in any matter at all would be something new indeed."

Cicely's eyes filled.

"I was *asking* for information, Aunt Joan; I know so little of mama."

Miss Joan softened directly; she laid down her work.

"And what is it that you wish to know?" she asked. "Your mother's marriage was an unhappy one; it was a cause of great grief to me; I never saw her after it."

"But before — when she was a girl at home?" said Cicely.

"Ah, then — yes, I had a great deal to do with her; I blame myself. My dear, if I would lead you not to ruin *your* little sister by over-indulgence, it is because I had a lesson in my own time. Your mother was the youngest of us all; both our parents were dead: perhaps we spoilt her."

"*We!* I can answer for it Mrs. Hart never spoilt any one in her life — or my Aunt Stanner either!" Cicely broke in, impetuously; "and did mama marry against your wishes?"

"It is not possible to pursue this subject —

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the faults of a parent are no fit topic for discussion with her child; and your mother *was* in fault, Cicely. I wonder you never questioned my brother Bertram, if you cared to have your childish impressions corrected or verified."

"I *did* question — we talked of her often, but not of her *faults*," cried Cicely, warmly; "he told of her beauty; what a good rider she was; how all the people about loved her; how she used to dance in the great hall at Christmas; and all that sort of thing. It had not entered my head *then* to ask about her sorrows or misfortunes; she had none at Hurst; *dear* Hurst! Uncle Bertram loved her, and loved us for her sake. I know *now* what misfortune is; I suppose that is why I think more of the time of poverty and misery before we went to Hurst."

Miss Joan took up her pins and went on with her stocking; a smile flitted over her features, and Cicely, interpreting it correctly, took offence.

"Don't you call it a misfortune, Aunt Joan, to lose your only earthly friend, and to be dependent upon your own exertions?"

"Undoubtedly."

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"And is not that my position?"

"Scarcely."

"When is it likely that we shall hear from Frank?" asked Cicely, resolved not to let another monosyllabic answer be possible.

"Somewhere about November or the end of October, I suppose," said Miss Damer, "unless, indeed, some of the messages and letters your Uncle Peter sent to places he was likely to visit reach him; in that case we should hear sooner."

"And then, when we *do* hear, our future will be decided. Aunt Joan, I should like to decide it before that."

Miss Joan looked at her, and smiled again. How could she know of the money lying at this moment in Cicely's desk upstairs? How absurd it must seem to her that Cicely could do anything for her own support! The thought of her promise to Ellen alone prevented the girl from alluding to her riches; but she wished to avoid questions which she should not feel at liberty to answer. Miss Joan's next remark, however, very nearly made her betray the secret.

"By the way, my dear, I have been remiss.

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Martha tells me several articles in your wardrobe require renewing. We must go shopping — or would you prefer an allowance? When I was your age ——"

Cicely interrupted her.

"How dare Martha tell you anything of the sort! I told her not."

"And why did you tell her not? You must not blame Martha. I found her making a dress for you, and then I questioned her. She gave very reluctant answers, Cicely; but I ascertained as a fact that your stockings were wearing out. Shall we drive to Southampton to-morrow, or, if you can manage with six pounds a quarter for the present, I need not interfere?"

"Aunt Joan! I don't want to be a burden on you!"

"My dear, you have no choice — that is, if you choose to consider yourself a burden; I assure you I do not look upon it in that light. Constance Ward, I know, contrives to dress upon five-and-twenty pounds a-year; do you think you can do the same?"

With the secret knowledge of her riches and,

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moreover, the remembrance that she could at any time increase them, by disposing of more of her mother's jewels, Cicely could decline this offer, not only graciously, but affectionately.

"Aunt Joan," she said, "I know you have already given up a horse for us, and, I dare say, you have done other things besides. I am not baby enough to suppose you can keep us all for nothing; but I don't want—*I won't have* an allowance, or any money at all. I can't tell you just now, but I will by-and-by, *why* I don't want it. Only do, please, let me discuss my plans with you openly. They are *quite* fixed — my mind is unalterably made up—but I would so much rather carry out my arrangements *with* your consent. Do talk over things rationally with me, dear aunt."

"As rationally as you please, Cicely; I am only too glad to do so, my dear child. If you will give me your confidence, I will give you all the benefit I can of my experience."

Miss Joan had dropped her work again. Cicely had left her seat and was kneeling by the side of her aunt's chair, the lamp-light falling full

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upon her flushed face. The aunt and niece were drawn nearer together in that hour than ever before, seemed on the point of fully understanding each other at last. If only Cicely would, indeed, talk rationally, give confidence, and listen to advice, all might be well, and her day-dreams would vanish as she woke to the happiness of a quiet contented life with heaven-appointed friends and protectors. But—just as Miss Damer stooped forward with the evident intention of bestowing upon her niece one of her rare embraces, Cicely started to her feet; the red glow of anger usurped the place of the flush of emotion on her countenance; there was an indignant flash from her eyes; she stood still for half a second, then turned round and dashed out of the room, upsetting the little table, lamp and all, as she did so.

Somehow or other Miss Joan did not seem surprised at this outburst. She rang the bell for the servant to pick up the lamp, and to remove, as well as she could, the stains of oil upon the carpet; and when the confusion was over, Miss Damer sat down again to Jacob's stocking apparently quite unmoved. But if any

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one had been there to hear, they might have heard her sigh as she repeated to herself Cicely's words when speaking of her uncle.

"Loved her mother, and loved the children for her sake, did he?" and Miss Joan shook her head sadly over the grey worsted. "Ah, well! poor child! poor child!"

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CHAPTER IX.

CICELY DEFENDS HER CHILDREN.

When Cicely so suddenly left the drawing-room, she ran upstairs, but fearing to wake Marion, and feeling it impossible to be still, she paced up and down the passage on to which her own bed-room door opened, till by degrees she cooled down sufficiently to trust herself not to disturb her little sleeping sister. Gleaming in the lamp-light, mocking her, as it were, with its brilliant flashes, she had seen on her aunt's hand her mother's diamond ring. She could not be mistaken. There was the very flaw in the setting which the jeweller had pointed out to her; it was most unmistakably the same ring she imagined to be safe at Southampton, and for which she had received the money now locked up in her desk. Whose was that money? Had the man sold the ring immediately to Miss Damer?

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Cicely could hardly think so. Had he consulted Miss Joan all along, and was the money hers? In addition to all other expense which she, who had so firmly resolved to be under no obligation at all, had forced her aunt to incur, was there now to be added the thirty-five pounds which she had fondly imagined to be so exclusively her own? And *why* had Miss Damer cheated her, tricked her, treated her like a child? What had she meant by the hypocritical offer to give her an allowance? was it only to try and draw her secret from her? Cicely's head throbbed as she thought of it. It was Ellen's fault, she cried to herself. How mean and underhand her aunt must think her to have begged to discuss her plans openly, while all the time she had taken secret steps. The girl's cheeks burned, all alone as she was. She began to wish she had spoken to Miss Damer instead of leaving her so abruptly; half thought she would go down and speak now, but she really felt ashamed to do so, and could not make up her mind to face her aunt's dry, grave questions, and short, cold answers. If she *had* spoken she would have found Miss Joan

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quite ready with the simple explanation that *she* had associations connected with that ring which made her value it, though Cicely had not, and finding her niece wished to part with it had purchased it herself, intending to give Cicely a lesson which might lead her to see how willingly and gladly Miss Joan would supply her every want when it was in her power to do so. Secretly afraid of creating a "scene," and still judging Cicely by the accounts of the fearful temper which her other aunts had so feelingly described, poor Miss Damer had thought cautiously to approach the subject of Cicely's empty purse by the round-about way of her dilapidated wardrobe. But it seemed as if the two were never to understand each other. Conscious of having been, to say the least, very silly, and mortified that Miss Joan should know of it, angry with herself, vexed with Ellen, poor Cicely put off explanations till the morning, and at the first sounds from the drawing-room indicating that her aunt was coming up for the night, she stole into her own room, undressed hastily, and actually cried herself to sleep.

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It was a new sensation to feel positively ashamed to go down to breakfast on the following morning. Cicely lingered over her toilette, and would not leave her room till the children came to fetch her with a message that the coffee was cooling, and the three Wards, who kept earlier hours than Miss Damer, were all downstairs. They had run over with the good news that their grandfather was better, and their mother spoke of returning the next day. Miss Joan was reading Mrs. Ward's letter when Cicely came in, and only looked up from it for a moment to return her niece's "good morning." Phillis began to laugh at Cicely for being so late, and Cicely was only too glad to be laughed at; she liked Phillis this morning a great deal better than Ellen, on whom she bestowed so cold a greeting that that capricious damsel felt all her ardent friendship, which had somewhat cooled of late, begin to glow afresh. She looked sentimental at once, tried to catch Cicely's eye, made little pleading signs to be forgiven and received into favour again, signs which the other would not notice. Cicely was eager in pressing Constance not to go away; declared she

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would have finished her breakfast in five minutes, and be ready for her French lesson. While she talked she swallowed her cold coffee, and choked down the tough toast, refusing Miss Joan's offer of having some fresh sent for; and every now and then, in spite of herself, her eyes rested on the diamonds as Miss Damer's hands moved amongst her cups and saucers. She fully intended to enter into explanations with her niece, but waited for the opportunity of speaking to her alone. Cicely seemed determined to give her no such opportunity. When her French was over and Constance gone, Miss Joan found her engrossed in little Marion's lessons, and after that she took the children out herself instead of sending them with Martha. The new dress was ready, but Cicely felt far too uncomfortable to wear it; she went about in the old one, avoiding her aunt as much as possible, and yet really wishing to have the explanation over. She could not be sorry, however, that by no fault of her own it was just as impossible to have a quiet *tête-à-tête* in the afternoon, as she had taken care it should be in the morning. The clergyman of the parish

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had looked in at luncheon-time, and when he left Cicely found herself alone in the drawing-room for a few minutes, while Miss Joan accompanied her friend to the garden-gate, in order to exchange with him some last words on parish matters. The great stains of oil stared Cicely in the face; the children were romping together on the lawn; she heard her aunt returning, but would not run away. Miss Joan came in and sat down; in her extreme nervousness Cicely stood up. Never in her life did she remember to have felt so like a chidden child.

"Now, my dear," began Miss Joan, "with regard to this ring."

"Yes, aunt."

The girl's voice shook, and sounded so unlike her usual tone that Miss Damer looked at her in surprise.

"My dear Cicely, I wish you would understand ——"

At that unlucky moment the hall-door bell rang. Miss Damer did not finish her sentence; in another moment a whole influx of visitors were shown in. They were friends from a distance;

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and in the Forest such friends do not pay the ordinary twenty minutes' visit of ordinary morning callers; the horses are put up, people expect to be asked to stay to tea, and to walk round the garden. These visitors were no exception to the rule, and, moreover, they knew the Wards, and the young ladies of the party begged Cicely to go over with them and see her neighbours. It ended in an impromptu game of croquet, and a very hilarious tea, only Cicely felt as if she were in a dream. There are few things so uncomfortable as for two people who live together to have a silent misunderstanding between them. Every time Miss Damer and her niece had occasion to address each other, they did so with the consciousness that all was not right between them. Chance remarks of the strangers brought burning blushes to Cicely's cheeks, or frowns to her aunt's brow.

"So *very* pleasant for your dear aunt to have a young companion," said a lady.

"And so pleasant for *you*," broke in her daughter; "you must know we all envy you for living with Miss Damer. I suppose you have found out

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that all the girls in the neighbourhood owe you a grudge for monopolising the very best and kindest chaperon known."

Cicely answered awkwardly that she knew no girls but the Wards.

"Oh, but we saw you at the Warings: Janet is charming," and the conversation glided into safer channels, only to return by-and-by to a topic almost as disagreeable to Cicely as that of her aunt's kindness.

"How very much you must feel the heat in black," was the remark that led to some good advice, which she could well have dispensed with; advice as to cooler materials than her paramatta, and as to patterns, and the best shops to deal at in Southampton, all given before Miss Damer, with constant appeals to her to confirm it. She answered rather stiffly, and was quite as uncomfortable as Cicely, who chose, however, to believe that her aunt was enjoying her discomfiture. The afternoon was far advanced towards evening when the party broke up, and even then a scheme was formed in which Cicely was almost *obliged* to join. Ellen and Phillis drove part of the way

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home with their friends, and Cicely was so entreated to join them that she could hardly refuse. She started in the carriage of her new acquaintances, while one of them took her place besides Ellen until it was time to return, when an exchange was effected, and after many farewells and plans for meeting the visitors drove off one way and the three girls another.

"They always stay such an age," said Ellen, "and *did* you see Lucy's dress! Fancy *her* giving advice to Cicely;" and she began to imitate the tone and manner of the young lady.

Phillis called her to order.

"I hate to hear you pick people to pieces the instant their backs are turned," she said; "of course they are not perfection, but they are very well in their way, and made themselves pleasant."

Cicely agreed with her, but confessed she was not sorry that such long days were rare; unless she liked people very particularly she did not care for quite so much of their society at one time.

"Well," said Phillis, "*I* like to be sociable."

As they drew near home Ellen slipped her hand into Cicely's; she was afraid to be demon-

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strative before her sister, but very anxious to hear the explanation of her friend's changed manner. She looked really sorrowful, and the pretty, pleading blue eyes so far touched Cicely's heart that she begged Phillis to set her and Ellen down and let them walk home together.

"I want to talk to her alone," she said, not caring in the least whether she were laughed at or not, and determined to have no more manœuvring. She was not inclined either to take Ellen further into her confidence; she only caressed her and assured her that she *did* love her dearly, and was not "tired of her;" new vows of friendship were exchanged under the grand old trees; the girls gathered tufts of heather for each other, and when they parted at last at Mrs. Ward's gate, Cicely really felt soothed by Ellen's affectionate manner, and wonderfully restored to her own self-esteem by the flattery which it was Ellen's habit to lavish upon those she loved. It was more comfortable to think of herself as an object of admiration to this young girl than it had been to see herself in the light in which she had too much reason to fear that her aunt regarded her. She

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felt prepared now to listen to and afford explanations as to the ring with far more dignity than it had been possible to summon up before flattery had restored her good opinion of herself. She would, of course, return the money to Miss Damer, but equally of course she would insist upon writing to Mrs. Maxwell, and following for the future the path she had chosen for herself, instead of tacitly submitting as hitherto to her aunt's authority. Turning over in her own mind the words of the address with which she intended to edify Miss Joan, Cicely slowly passed through the garden and into the house. She met no one; the drawing-room door stood ajar, and she could see the apartment was empty. Rather surprised that the little ones did not as usual run to meet her on her return, Cicely went upstairs and opened the door of Bertram's nursery adjoining her own room. Only Martha was there; she sat working by the window. Cicely was about to ask for the children when sounds of woe struck upon her ear.

"Let me out! I'll tell sister. Oh, let me out!"

It was Marion's voice, and proceeded from a

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light closet on the stairs; the words being accompanied by kicks against the door.

"What on earth ——" began Cicely, then breaking off suddenly she hurried to the closet, threw open the door and disclosed Marion, her face swollen with tears, her hands tied behind her back, and in the act of preparing to renew her kicks.

Cicely snatched her in her arms, rushed to her own room, half carrying, half leading the sobbing child; and there, while with trembling fingers she untied the handkerchief that bound her arms, demanded an explanation from the terrified Martha.

"I knew you'd be put out, Miss; I said so."

"Put out! Who dared do this? And you to sit there quietly at work! Where is Master Bertram?"

"She whipped him, she did!" cried Marion, clinging to her sister, and in spite of her own grievances rather enjoying the excitement of seeing Cicely in a passion, and feeling her small self a heroine; "and she shut me up."

"He was *in* the water, Miss," Martha ventured

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to say; "he wouldn't mind me, and really for once in a way it may be as well."

"Hush! leave the room; and, Martha, you may leave my service this day month; go, not a word, you should have prevented this. Where *is* Bertie, my darling? Oh, my poor motherless children!"

"He's in Aunt Joan's room; she's there, too," said Marion; "she shut me up because I tried to defend him — I gave her such a jolly thumping, Cis."

"But that was naughty; oh! what shall I do?" Cicely hugged the little girl in her arms, then hastily set her down, and flew off to her aunt's room. Marion followed to see the fun.

Miss Joan's "Come in" was as quietly spoken as usual, and Cicely was rather taken aback to find Bertram seated at his aunt's knee with his head on her lap, while she read him a story; the little face was tear-stained and flushed however, and Cicely felt her indignation was not thrown away.

"He has been a very naughty boy, I was obliged to punish him," began Miss Damer, and

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then indeed Cicely's words came hot and hasty. Poor Miss Joan was frightened at the storm she had provoked, and more than frightened, thoroughly angry and displeased. When Cicely at last seized Bertram and carried him off to her own room, declaring that she wished for no dinner and would come down no more that evening, her aunt could only say that, "decidedly she had better remain by herself till she had learnt to control her temper."

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CHAPTER X.

MISSING!

CONSTANCE rose earlier than usual the next day. She rejoiced at the thoughts of her mother's return, and busied herself about one or two household matters which she was anxious Mrs. Ward should find in order; but it appeared that Ellen had been up earlier still. She came in through the windows of the breakfast-room with her hands full of flowers.

"There are hardly any roses now," she said. "I shall have to give up 'mother's cup' early this season."

"You can't expect roses very late in September," answered Constance; "where have you been at this time in the morning? I don't believe Phillis is dressed, and she is generally down before any of us."

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There was some confusion in Ellen's manner, but her sister was too busy to notice it.

"I met Martha in the road near Miss Damer's as I came in;" she went on arranging her flowers as she spoke. "*She* was up early if you like; she had been to the farm for new milk for Bertram."

"Nothing unusual, she goes there every morning; what took *you* on the road, Ellen?"

"There was such a piece of work with the children yesterday," continued Ellen, evading the question. "It seems that, while we were out, that little piece of mischief, Marion, persuaded Master Bertie to climb the wall where Miss Damer had forbidden him to do it. When Martha saw them the child was almost over, and would not attend to her, only scrambled up all the faster when he saw her coming."

"The water-butt must have a cover," interposed Constance.

"Oh, I don't think he'll do it again! he's had enough of the water-butt now—too much! Fancy! in his haste he fell in, and there he was clinging to the edges with both hands,

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and his fat little legs up to the knees in the water!"

"Lucky for him the weather has been dry lately; I don't suppose there is enough water there now to drown him if he had gone in altogether."

"Up comes Miss Joan, Bertie was pulled out, and she carried him off to give him the whipping I hear she promised him, when Miss Marion flew at her, and thumped and kicked — like a fury, Martha said."

"You must have had a fine gossip with Martha. I thought she was as apt to take part with the children as Cicely is."

"Oh no! she complains they are so spoilt she don't know them, and she was in such terror about the water-butt, that it was quite a comfort to her to get Master Bertram well punished and frightened; but the worst of it is that Cicely seems to have felt it very much: there was quite a scene when she got home, and she gave Martha warning."

"What rubbish! it is Miss Damer pays Martha's wages — she is her servant."

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"Cicely don't look upon it in that light. I only hope——" Ellen broke off, and stood apparently lost in thought. "Do you think she fully understands her?" she asked, after a moment's silence.

"Do I think *who* 'fully understands' who?'

"Miss Damer, do you think she understands Cicely?"

"I think Cicely don't understand Miss Joan, or know when she is well off," said Constance.

"I wonder what will be the end of it?"

"The end of this fuss about the little ones, do you mean? Why, it will blow over of course, and things will settle down again. Mother is coming home, too, you know, and Cicely likes her. I suppose mother *is* more used to girls than Miss Damer can be;" and Constance laughed a happy little laugh, feeling that everybody's troubles would be over when "mother" was home again.

"Ah! I know what I know," said Ellen mysteriously; "I fancy some one besides Bertram repents yesterday's work by this time."

The girls had finished breakfast, and separated to their customary occupations; Ellen to the

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drawing-room to practise, Constance to the kitchen, and Phillis stood at the back door feeding the poultry, when Miss Joan appeared with letters in her hands.

"Good morning, Phillis!" she began; "I thought I should find you here. I came to ask at what hour your mother is expected; also to see if you can let me have some eggs."

The poultry were in Phillis's charge, and she and Miss Joan often did business together. Constance, her keys in her hand, and wearing her great brown holland house-keeping apron, joined them.

"Mother will be here about seven this evening," she said. "We had another letter this morning with an account of grandpapa; isn't it good news, Miss Damer?"

"So late! Will your mother really not be here till evening?" Miss Joan looked vexed. "I must wait another day then. I was particularly anxious to consult her before speaking to Cicely, about some good news that I have heard. A letter has arrived from her Cousin Frank — the letter we were waiting for!"

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"So soon!" exclaimed Constance. "I thought you did not expect to hear before November. Is Cicely satisfied now?" and she laughed gaily.

"Of course not," laughed Phillis in answer, and throwing handfuls of corn to her fowls. "Captain Damer's would still be the 'bread of dependence,' you know. I prophesy Cicely is at this moment bewailing her hard fate at having her retirement here broken in upon—if it is to be broken?"

"Cicely knows nothing yet of my having received this letter," said Miss Joan; "it was a very great surprise to me, my dears. It appears that New York had so many attractions, the young couple never got any further. The first message sent reached them at once. My nephew has been in correspondence with my brother Peter—at last they have seen fit to write to me. But I will not interrupt you, Constance; tell your dear mother I am anxious for her advice, I shall look in in the evening."

Miss Damer departed, and Phillis having satisfied her hens and chickens, locked the corn-bin, and went to tell Ellen the news.

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"Heard from Captain Damer! Only at New York—why, perhaps he is actually in England! Why didn't you ask?"

"It was no concern of mine," said Phillis. "My dear Ellen, I never knew you take such a violent interest in other people's concerns. What *can* it matter to you?"

"How extraordinary! who would have thought it? To hear *to-day* of all days!" Ellen kept repeating, still sitting at the piano with her hands in her lap, and seeming quite unable to get over the shock of such surprising intelligence.

"Really I think we have said enough about it," said Phillis, rather impatiently. "*I* am tired of the subject; if you are not I advise you to go and talk to Cicely herself. Indeed I wonder you are not gone already, that you did not rush over there at once!"

Ellen immediately recommenced her practice, for some reason or other she did not seem to approve of Phillis's suggestion, but evidently she had not dismissed the subject from her thoughts; all through the morning she kept recurring to it, asking questions as to what Miss Damer had said,

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wondering what proposal Captain Damer would make, wondering whether he were in England, and constantly repeating that it was very strange the news should have come on that particular day. She said it so often that Constance's attention was attracted.

"Why is it more strange on this day than on any other?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know; because of the quarrel about the children, and one thing and another—it *is* strange," said Ellen, vaguely.

"Fortunate, I should say," remarked Constance; "a new subject of interest will put whippings and water-butts out of Cicely's head. She will make it up with Miss Joan over her cousin's letter. I hope we shall not lose her."

"I thought you didn't care about her?"

"I do, excessively. I did not fall in love at first sight as you did yourself; but I have grown to like her very much, and so has Phil."

Phillis nodded.

"I wouldn't lose her for the world; she's such fun. What should we do for a heroine? One never knows what fine theory she will start next;

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it is quite an excitement living next door to a 'dependent orphan.'"

"Ah, *you* laugh at her! I feel for her," sighed Ellen.

"Yes, I laugh, and it does her good to be laughed at — ever so much more good than to be 'felt for;' but, joking apart, I think her by far the nicest girl I ever met. It is you, Ellen, who seem of late to like her less than you did."

To the astonishment of her sisters Ellen burst out with a hasty exclamation,—

"I'm sick of the sound of her name, and wish I'd never set eyes on her in my life!" saying which she whisked off her work from the large table at which she had been seated, and went out of the room.

"The reaction, I suppose," said Phillis, shrugging her shoulders.

"I feel as if there was something wrong somewhere," said Constance, looking round uneasily. "However, mother will be home to-night, thank goodness!"

A little before luncheon the patter of small

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feet was heard on the garden walk, and a light tap sounded on the window. Marion stood there peeping in between the clustering roses. The girls bid her come in.

"Are you a good child to-day?" asked Constance, as the little girl came up to her.

"Yes!" Marion hung her head sheepishly and stood on one leg, "please, I want Cicely."

"She's not here — hasn't been here that I know of, unless she and Ellen are gone off together in the garden somewhere. See, who is it loves ginger-bread?" and Phillis held up a tempting little cake.

The child came round to her to take it, and after munching in silence for a few minutes, remarked,—

"Aunt Joan wants Cicely."

"Well, go and look for her," said Phillis.

"But I have looked, and I can't find her."

"When did she go out? after your lessons, I suppose?"

"I don't know; I did lessons with Auntie."

"What was that for?"

"Oh, I like it, and Cicely wasn't there. Where

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is she?" repeated Marion, finishing the last crumb of her cake, and sidling up to Phillis for more.

"Find Ellen, and Cicely won't be far off," said Constance, but at that moment Ellen came into the room again. She blushed when both her sisters at once exclaimed,—

"What have you done with Cis?" and answered crossly that she had seen nothing of her.

"But you saw her at breakfast," persisted Marion; "she had breakfast here?"

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Phillis, and then it came out that Cicely had not been present at her aunt's breakfast, but had gone out very early, and, as she had not returned, every one imagined her to be with the Wards. Constance and Phillis questioned the little girl closely; it was strange that Ellen said nothing, but stood with her back to the others, looking out of the window.

"Miss Damer was here herself," exclaimed Constance; "she *knew* Cicely was not with us."

"Auntie said there was only you and Phil, and that Ellen and Cicely were somewhere else," ob-

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served Marion; "and please let me have a bantam egg, Phillis?"

"But where can she be? What can it mean?" said Phillis. "Went out quite early in the morning before Martha called them, and not back yet! She has lost herself in the Forest at last—so positive as she was that she could never get into such a scrape!"

"There's the luncheon-bell," observed Ellen quietly, apparently affecting to think it a matter of no consequence whether her friend were lost or not, but, as the bell still sounded, Miss Damer was seen crossing the lawn; she, too, had come in search of her niece. She was very much flurried indeed.

"We must send out to find her—poor child—nothing to eat all day—she will be tired out. This had never occurred to me. I thought she was out of temper, and preferred your society to mine to-day. I had some reason for thinking so."

"Don't worry, dear Miss Damer," said Phillis, consolingly; "Cis is not a baby; she will meet some one who will direct her: we have all been

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lost in the Forest in our day, and mother never cared. Isn't it so, Constance? Tell Miss Joan not to distress herself."

But Constance did not answer: she was looking fixedly at Ellen, whose colour came and went under her sister's gaze, and whose confusion seemed to increase every instant.

"Ellen, you know something or other that the rest of us are ignorant of: what is it?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ellen, pettishly, and trying to release herself from Constance, who had taken hold of her arm as she spoke. "What should I know?"

"If you *do* know where Cicely is, and are keeping her secret, you are doing very wrong," said Phillis.

Miss Damer seemed puzzled; she came up to Ellen and put her hand on her shoulder; the young girl was obliged to stand still and obliged to give a plain answer now.

"Ellen, if you know where my niece is, I desire you to tell me. Have you seen her to-day?"

Slowly and unwillingly Ellen answered,—

"Yes."

"And when? at what hour?"

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"At six this morning."

"Where?"

"Here; she came under my window."

"And where is she now? did she tell you where she was going?"

Silence, and Ellen turned her head away; Miss Joan gave her a little shake.

"This is unlike your mother's daughter, Ellen—this silly, school-girlish behaviour! Tell me at once, where is Cicely?"

"Gone."

"Gone!" repeated Miss Damer—"where to?"

"To Mrs. Maxwell;" and Ellen burst into tears, and ran out of the room.

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CHAPTER XI.

ALONE WITH MRS. MOX.

At Bennington nothing was thought of but guns and dogs. It was September, the boys were all at home, and it was well for Mrs. Morland that she was not a nervous mother—nerves and nine sons would have gone ill together. It was the first year that a license had been taken out for Ralph; his father gave him a breech-loader, and there was always a swarm of little brothers at his heels. Guns were heard, too, in the Hurst woods; the Captain had not arrived, but he was expected, and word had been sent to Mr. Peter to shoot the preserves, instead of letting them, as there had been some talk of doing. The covers that the Squire had loved were full of birds, his favourite pointer behaved as well as ever in the turnip-fields; only the gamekeeper seemed discontented;

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Mr. Peter was not popular, and all the servants and dependants on the place gave many a regretful thought to the old master whose grave was grass-grown now, or looked forward to the day when his son would be master in his stead.

Ralph Morland looked forward also to Captain Damer's return. There were no woods the boy loved as he did those at Hurst, where the Squire had taught him first to shoot, where Cicely had gone with him to carry home his rabbits, where they had so often nutted together, and spent whole days upon secret expeditions of their own. He had always been welcome at Hurst, and now the gates were shut upon him. He had come upon Mr. Peter one evening in the road just outside the lodge, and had shown him his breech-loader and boasted of his license to shoot, but the half-expected invitation to join in the Hurst cover-shooting had not followed, and Ralph went home grumbling.

His mother sat working by the fading light, holding her work up to the window; the room, as usual, was full of boys, Ralph stumbled over two or three as he made his way across it and threw

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himself upon the broad window-sill. He related his grievances.

"Never mind," said his mother, consolingly; "Papa heard from London by the afternoon mail; Frank Damer is at the Clarendon; they will be home to-morrow or next day. By the way, there was a letter for you, Ralph."

"We shall have Cicely back, I dare say, when the Captain is home," said Ralph; "I wonder how that girl is getting on. Did she never write to you, mother?"

Mrs. Morland shook her head.

"No, and as to getting on of course she is contented by this time. Why do you imagine we shall have her back? Glad enough should I be to see her dear little face again, but I fancy she is better off where she is."

Ralph laughed quietly to himself; he was thinking of Cicely's flights in the hay-field, and wondering whether she had really settled down peaceably.

"Give us that letter, Tom," he said by-and-by.

"Don't know where 'tis," answered the particular boy addressed, but several other boys appeared

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better informed, and after a little scrimmaging about the room, the letter was produced and thrown to him. Ralph gave an exclamation of surprise as he looked at it.

"Why, it's Cis herself! Upon my word, if it is not to be the knight-errant business after all! She has run away—see here, mother, listen, 'obliged to leave my aunt; you will find me here —no money.' Claims my promise to come to her in time of need. Well, this beats all!" and Ralph tossed the letter into his mother's lap, and jumped up as though he would go to Cicely then and there. Mrs. Morland read the epistle more quietly.

"What can have happened?" she exclaimed.

"Some quarrel with her aunt, I suppose."

"But what an outrageous thing to do! To run away to London alone and write to *you!* Thank goodness you are none of you young ladies!"

"I echo the thanksgiving," said Ralph, "but I don't suppose young ladies are in the habit of doing such things, and it's not so bad as it looks, mother. You see she went straight to that old governess-woman. What a goose not to knew this was holiday time, and that Mrs. What's-her-

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name was sure to be away. I'd better run up at once. Just time to catch the evening express. Give us something to eat, and I'll be off."

Mrs. Morland felt rather indignant with Cicely.

"Such trouble to give! You must bring her here of course, that is, if she really won't go back to her aunt and behave herself. Think of her taking such a freak into her head now when Frank is just arrived. By the way, Ralph, you should go first to the Clarendon and take Annie with you to Cicely; then she can travel down with them: it is not so badly timed after all."

Ralph would have preferred carrying out the knight-errantry adventure by himself, but was willing to obey his mother, not without a lurking idea that *she* was the best judge of what it would be right to do for a girl who had got herself in such a scrape. Cicely gave no particulars; she had only written a few words to say that, obliged to leave Miss Damer suddenly, she had been unfortunate enough to find Mrs. Maxwell away from home, and was not only alone in London, but had no money to travel down to Bennington with, or she would have been her own messenger.

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"That would have been a start!" cried Ralph, with his mouth full of cold-meat pie. "I wish she *had* been her own messenger; fancy her coming in like a ghost this autumn evening."

"She's a very foolish girl," said Mrs. Morland, filling her son's glass with ale.

"On the contrary, mother, she's a clever girl; only crazy on this particular subject; clever girls are more difficult to guide than stupid ones—their ideas run away with them."

"Pretty excuse! If you had a sister, Ralph, and she set her friends at defiance in this unmaidenly way ——"

"Don't, mother!" interrupted the boy, who winced at the word she had applied to Cicely; "no daughter of yours *would* do such a thing, and I'll soon bring Cis to her senses, she *is* pretty nearly as good as a sister to me. You'll forgive her when you see her."

Half-an-hour later he was driving rapidly towards the station, down the Red Hill, along the road on which Cicely and Miss Joan had first met; at the foot of the hill he passed his father, and called out to him throughout the fast-gather-

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ing twilight. Mr. Morland came home in a somewhat bewildered state of mind.

"What's this about Cicely?" he asked of his wife. "And where was Ralph going at that pace in the new dog-cart?" He was as vexed at the troublesome girl's foolish conduct as Mrs. Morland had been herself; and declared that the young lady should not come to Bennington at all, but that Annie Damer was the proper person to take charge of her; "and a nice charge she'll find her! The poor Squire! Little did he think how his favourite niece would turn out!"

"My dear," remarked Mrs. Morland mildly, "she has not 'turned out' at all yet—she is only 'turning,' and at sixteen there is room for improvement." Her own displeasure cooled in presence of her husband's anger against the silly girl.

The following morning saw Cicely anxiously watching for her true knight. She was vexed with herself for having been so foolish as to remember how unlikely it was that Mrs. Maxwell would be still in town early in September. After parting from her Aunt in a fit of indignation, and

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carrying off poor, poor little Bertram to weep over him and reawaken his own grief, which had been happily over before his sister's return, Cicely had at last sat down to write in sober earnest the much-talked-of epistle which was to free her from the yoke of authority and open the door to independence. But she could not satisfy herself. She wrote and rewrote her letter, and still the uncomfortable feeling remained that Mrs. Maxwell would not understand, or, at all events, that her eloquence would only win her some kind but temporising reply, whereas, if she could but *see* her, Cicely felt convinced she should be able to gain her point. Why not go up to London by the early parliamentary train which stopped at the little station in the Forest, have an interview with Mrs. Maxwell, and write by that evening's post to her Aunt, informing her that her future career was decided, apologizing for her abrupt departure, and begging that Martha might bring the little ones to join her? As she lay awake through the night the idea gained strength, and early in the morning she carried it out. Marion awoke while she was dressing, but readily accepted the explanation that

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Cicely was going out to enjoy the lovely morning. Enough remained of the five pounds to pay her expenses to Stanhope Street, where Mrs. Maxwell lived, near Kensington Gardens, in which her 'young ladies' took their daily exercise, and the unlucky bank-notes received from Southampton were folded in an envelope addressed to Miss Damer and left in the drawer of the writing-table. As she passed the Wards' house, with all its bedroom windows open to admit the fresh morning air, Cicely could not resist entering the garden and softly calling to Ellen, who slept in a little room by herself over the porch; there was plenty of time, and Ellen might possibly be awake and answer her. As luck would have it, Ellen *was* awake, and soon joined her friend in a perfect fever of foolish excitement about the whole affair. The girls walked together nearly to the station, but, parted just before reaching it. As soon as Cicely was fairly gone Ellen began to see how wrong she had been, and every hour grew more and more cross at what she called "the scrape that tiresome girl would get her into." After her disclosure of the secret, and when it was further discovered

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that she had not even had the wit to ask Mrs. Maxwell's address, of which Miss Damer was quite ignorant, Ellen had remained all day in her own room, dreading her mother's arrival, because she knew how easily a word from herself might have prevented all the mischief, even if that word had been delayed till Cicely was fairly started. Had Miss Joan known what had happened, nothing would have been easier than to telegraph to a friend to meet the train on its arrival in town. It struck her instantly that there was hardly a chance of Mrs. Maxwell being found at home, and she was of course very much displeased and also extremely anxious about her niece.

As for the interesting heroine herself, her spirits rose higher and higher with each mile that separated her from her Aunt, nor did they receive a check until the door-bell in Stanhope Street was answered by the respectable charwoman left in charge of the house, who could only tell her that Mrs. Maxwell was abroad, where she did not know, as her orders were to keep all letters and forward none. Cicely was in dismay. She had

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dismissed her cab, and even had she not done so there remained just one shilling and fourpence in her purse. She had no money to pay her railway fare either back to the Forest or into Sussex. She mentioned her name and that of her late uncle, but the woman knew neither, and could only suggest the shilling being spent in sending a telegram to the young lady's friends. Cicely preferred spending it in breakfast for herself, and writing to Ralph. She could not bring herself to go back to Miss Joan after such an ignominious failure; now, if ever, was the time for her friends at Bennington to come to her help; she would get them to receive her and the children until Mrs. Maxwell's return, which was expected in a week or ten days. She was ignorant enough of the ways of the world to be excessively indignant at the respectable charwoman's hesitation to give her a night's lodging and evident suspicion of the truth of her story. However she *was* admitted, and a meal prepared for her, but her letter to Ralph, though written immediately afterwards, was too late for the country post, owing to the fact that Mrs. Mox would not leave the house in

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order to post it until a friend of hers looked in, a friend whom she could leave in her place. Cicely was afraid to go out herself—the crowded streets —crowded to her unaccustomed eyes even at that dull season—alarmed her; for all that day and all the next she lingered at the window in the front parlour, and two days so utterly, miserably dull Cicely never remembered to have passed in the whole course of her life. On the second of them she had expressed an inclination to venture out, but for some reason or other the worthy Mrs. Mox discouraged the idea. Cicely wandered through the empty rooms, where the carpets were all up, counted the iron bedsteads, looked over the books and desks in the school-room, tried to imagine what life would be like in that house when the girls were back, Mrs. Maxwell at home, and she herself pupil-teacher, and finally laid down her head upon the ink-bespattered table and indulged in a good cry. The second morning she awoke in renewed spirits. She knew her letter must have reached Ralph by the day mail the previous afternoon, and made sure of seeing him early.

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"He will know now that I have too much spirit to submit to tyranny over the poor children or to dependence for myself, and that odious woman in the house here will learn to be civil and repent watching me as if she thought she was harbouring a thief," said Cicely to herself as she stood at the window trying to catch a glimpse of the trees in Kensington Gardens, and hoping every cab that rattled past would turn out to be the cab of her deliverer. At last one did stop at the door; it was a close cab, and for a moment Cicely wondered why Ralph should not have driven in a Hansom, but was too pleased to see his handsome face looking out to do more than pause for a moment on her way to the door. She flung it open herself, but Ralph was not alone, he was handing out a fashionably-dressed lady, and —— on the pavement beside them stood her cousin Frank Damer!

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CHAPTER XII.

THE SYMPATHETIC ANNIE.

ASTONISHMENT kept Cicely mute; she could only stare.

"Knight-errant to the rescue; eh, Cis?" laughed Ralph, who at the first sight of her felt himself completely on the old footing, and had no inclination to lecture.

"Didn't expect *us* to come to the rescue too, did you?" asked Frank. "Why, Cicely, what is it all about? what brought you up to town in such a hurry!"

"Darling! how glad I am to see you?" said Mrs. Damer; "but hadn't we better go into the house?" for Cicely seemed rooted to the door-step, and the passers-by stared at her.

Feeling as if in a dream, she turned to lead the way into Mrs. Maxwell's deserted parlour;

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being dimly conscious as she did so that the head and shoulders of Mrs. Mox had emerged from the cavernous-looking depths of the kitchen-stairs at the end of the passage, and that the face of the worthy charwoman beamed with satisfaction over the dust-pan and brush she carried. Before emerging altogether into daylight preparatory to mounting the carpetless stairs into the upper regions of the house, Mrs. Mox, who appeared much impressed by Annie's silk flounces and pretty bonnet, was understood to murmur that she "were glad as the young lady's friends had arrived, and that she had done her best to make her comfortable, which wasn't easy in a empty house and the missis absent;" and then they were all in the dull, dusty room, and the door was shut. Cicely found her voice at last, and began to ask eager questions.

"So you were at home, after all! Oh, Annie, what I have gone through! and *why* should she have wished to deceive me?" for the girl, always unjust to poor Miss Joan, had jumped to the conclusion that she had known of her nephew's return.

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"What a dreadful place!" said Mrs. Damer, looking round upon the bare boards, the carpets rolled up and lying in a corner, the pictures taken from their nails and leaning with their faces to the wall, the horse-hair furniture standing in wild disorder, the chandelier enveloped in a brown linen bag, and the dust and London "blacks" over everything. "What a dreadful place! did you really think you could *live* here, Cicely?"

"But what's the row? you have not told us yet;" and Ralph's eyes twinkled with amusement; it was so like Cicely, and so unlike any other girl, to be discovered with these surroundings, and, as he felt more than half convinced, with no real reason for the ridiculous step she had taken.

"Couldn't hit it off with the old lady?" said Frank; "well, there's no harm done. You must come back to Hurst of course. Whatever any of you went away for I can't imagine."

"And the children?" interposed Cicely hastily; "I may have them with me?"

"Of course. I shall be no end glad to see the little beggars cutting about the place. We

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have just time to catch the 11.15 down, if you look sharp."

"Poor darling!" cried Mrs. Annie, who looked unspeakably fresh and pretty in the dusty, deserted room. "I'm sure you have had a terrible time; but it is over now, and you need never go back to the cross old thing —— Take care, love!" and she drew back with a dismayed cry as Cicely was about to bestow upon her one of her impulsive embraces, "my *things* you know; *crêpe* is ruined by being crushed. Oh, Cicely, you can't imagine how pleasant it was in New York! Paris fashions, actually. I'm sure my mourning is as pretty as any I could have got in London."

"In New York!" repeated Cicely, feeling a little hurt at the "sympathetic Annie's" devotion to her "things" and dread of a good honest hug; "did you stay long there?"

"Never went anywhere else! and never wished to. We had introductions to such charming people; and now Frank is selling out, and we shall escape China altogether—isn't it delightful?"

Cicely glanced at her cousin as he stood in the window. She did not feel quite equal to offering

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congratulations upon his "delightful." circumstances, remembering the loss to which the change was owing, but his eyes met hers with a look of perfect understanding.

"Of course I must sell out and live at Hurst now," he said, with a sigh, which told plainly that his father was in his thoughts; "and you will be glad to come home, though you haven't told us yet how you and my aunt managed to come to grief."

"No," said Ralph, "your letter was rather vague, but suggestive of all sorts of horrors. Pray satisfy our curiosity—I *should* say relieve our anxiety, only that your sufferings seem to have agreed with you, you look so blooming;" and so she did, for her unformed girlish beauty lost nothing by contrast with Annie's more finished style and the air of fashion which distinguished her.

"I'm sure Miss Joan was horrid," observed little Mrs. Damer, gathering her skirts carefully about her as she sank in a graceful attitude upon the horse-hair sofa.

Cicely waxed eloquent at once. She detailed

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her wrongs, though the looks of exaggerated compassion bestowed upon her by Ralph made her regret how slight they were, and wish heartily that Miss Joan had been more tyrannical. But, at all events, there were her schemes for independence thwarted, and the final cruelty to her "motherless little charges," upon both which themes she dilated to her heart's content; while Annie said "Poor darling!" from time to time, and Frank looked out of the window while he listened, thinking that "women always squabbled, and that they were safe to miss the 11.15 train."

"And then," Cicely wound up as a climax to the list of Miss Joan's offences, "never to tell me that you were in England, when it concerned me more than anyone else in the world! Treated like a child, deceived—tricked——"

"Why she didn't know it herself till the very morning you ran away?" exclaimed Frank, making Cicely feel so foolish that she was grateful to Mrs. Damer for suggesting that they should leave that dreadful, empty house at once, and get dear

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darling Cicely home as soon as possible. "Would she please have her luggage brought downstairs; the cab was waiting, and the man could help that person in the kitchen carry it." She opened her blue eyes to their fullest extent on hearing there was no luggage to bring.

"Call the chicks then, and let's be off—the 11.15 won't wait for us," said Frank, tapping impatiently on the window-pane.

"The children! They are not with me."

"Where are they then?"

"I was obliged to leave them of course. Martha is to bring them to join me. If you——" Cicely was interrupted by a peal of laughter from Ralph; he threw himself back in his chair, and the empty room re-echoed to the sound.

"Well, what is it now?" asked Cicely, who did not see the joke.

"Cruelty to the motherless little ones!" laughed the provoking boy: "why it's even better than the 'bread of dependence,' Cis, for here have you been and gone and left the precious infants to her tender mercies entirely! Rather a queer way

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of defending them from cruelty, to run away and leave them! Who knows what may have happened since you saw them last?"

She turned away from him impatiently.

"If you would wait for the last train, Frank, and if we telegraphed at once, there would be just time to have them up."

"Oh, no, love!" put in Annie, who for some reason or other best known to herself had brightened visibly; "pray don't do that. It's a relief they are *not* here, I'm sure—at least I mean I had rather wait till we are home, and I have time to turn round. I don't even know what servants there are, or what rooms are ready. Do let us go down quietly by ourselves, and send for the dear children when we are ready."

Cicely's heart sank. Pretty, soft-spoken, sympathising Annie made it, in some quite indescribable manner, so plain that *she* was mistress at Hurst, and that whatever her cousin wished, the children would *not* go there until Mrs. Damer chose to be "ready" for them.

"There is Martha—she will do everything; she is a host in herself, and there are the old rooms."

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"I don't know, dear. There is so much wants doing. Mr. Peter says the house is so out of repair it may tumble about our heads any day. We will fit up new nurseries—it will be so nice to have you to help me to choose papers and things, and you shall arrange their rooms and your own *just* as you please. We are going to make you so happy at Hurst; you shall forget all about that horrid Hampshire place, and it will be *such* a comfort to me to have you. Now, too, when we can't have our friends, you know, because of the mourning, think how dull it would be for me to be all alone;" and Annie leant forward to bestow a judicious kiss which did not rumple her crêpe.

How sorrowfully Cicely remembered that she had been "happy at Hurst" before Annie had ever seen the place, and that the only thing to make her so again was the presence there of her little brother and sister! There was a moment's silence as she thought over it, and felt a little comforted to notice the old kind look on Ralph's countenance, and to hear the half-whispered, "Never mind, Cis! all in good time!" for the

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boy felt sorry for the scrape his friend had got into, and knew better than any one else how her heart would ache till she had her children once more.

Frank asked suddenly whether anyone had yet told Miss Joan where her niece was, and then hurried the party away that he might have time to telegraph from the station before the train started. Cicely hardly had time to think,—no time at all to write the letter she had intended to leave for Mrs. Maxwell,—she must write now from Hurst. It was with a painful sense of mortification at the failure of her spirited attempt at independence, that she gave a last look round the school parlour, and said good-bye to Mrs. Mox, whose respect for her had been not a little increased by the substantial manner in which Frank had requited her efforts to "make the young lady comfortable." She stood at the door as the cab drove off, and Cicely almost regretted losing sight of her friendly if grimy countenance; almost wished she had made up her mind to remain in Stanhope Street till Mrs. Maxwell returned; did not indeed quite know why she had *not* done so unless it

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was that Frank and Annie too seemed to take it for granted, without any explanations, that Hurst, and Hurst only, was the proper place for their orphan cousins. At the station, so much did a sense of coercion, such a sense as she had never felt when with Miss Joan, weigh upon Cicely, that she for a passing moment entertained the idea of returning meekly to Hampshire! She stood by Captain Damer's side in the telegraph office, and once actually laid her hand upon his arm, intending to ask him to change the message he was writing for the simple one that she would be at Southampton that evening. Imagination conjured up the familiar scene. She could *see* Miss Joan's grave face, with its wiry little side-curls, and her figure sitting perfectly upright in the carriage, while Jacob stood at the head of the old grey. And then the long drive home, the first part of it still in bright light, with a soft gleam upon Southampton Water on their left hand; but evening gradually stealing on, till under the forest trees near home it would be quite dark,—so dark that Ellen Ward, standing by the gate, would only be visible by the shim-

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mer of her white dress, and Cicely would hear the voices of her own little ones long before she could see them.

"Eh, what?" said Frank, turning as she touched him; "don't be afraid! I'm wording it civilly enough, saying you will write and all that you know. Any particular message?" and Cicely said "No!" Pride usurped its sway; the message was despatched as Frank had written it, and they took their places in the train.

But she did not enjoy the journey. That Ralph should laugh at her was almost past bearing, and he could not refrain from a quizzical glance now and then, or an allusion to the cruelties poor Miss Joan might possibly at that very moment be inflicting upon the defenceless children deserted by their natural protector. She had hoped, too, to have been able to discuss her plans quietly with Frank when once they were fairly started, and make him understand that an asylum at Hurst for the present was all she wished for; but he buried himself in the *Times*, only now and then joining in his wife's descriptions of their wedding trip, and—this last greatly to the in-

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dignation both of Ralph and Cicely—in her abuse of the dilapidated state of the house at Hurst.

"I can't *think* what the Squire was about to buy such a place! It's not as if it had been in the family; he might have had a new house anywhere for the same money," said Annie, pettishly.

"It's the dearest old place in the world," cried Cicely.

"And the Squire was fond of it," said Ralph, who thought any reflection upon what his old friend had thought good to do, was in bad taste just then.

"Nonsense! he *couldn't* have cared about it; why he only bought it six years ago."

But six years is a long time in young lives, and Cicely's feelings were not soothed by Frank's exclamation,—

"A ramshackle old rat-hole!" for he bethought him ruefully of the estimates for repairs which Mr. Peter had forwarded to him.

"Then I *like* 'rat-holes'—they are just the kind of houses I prefer," Cicely whispered to Ralph

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before resigning herself to listen to the incessant stream of talk with which Mrs. Damer enlivened the way. Cicely's own affairs seemed forgotten. Of course her late trip, Paris fashions, improvements at Hurst, were one and all more interesting to Annie, than squabbles between Miss Joan and her niece, or histories of naughty children. Affectionate as her manner was, and often as she repeated how "nice" it was to have Cicely for a companion, and how happy they would be living together, the poor child felt more and more depressed. Once, when Frank laid down his newspaper, looked at his watch, and yawned frightfully, she did try to talk to him of the future.

"I should like it to be settled, Frank, please; if you wouldn't mind talking it over with me now."

"Talking what over?"

"Why, *us*. I don't think it any fairer that we should be a burden on you than on Aunt Joan. There was no will you know——" She was stopped at once.

"What *does* that matter? No one in their senses supposes my father *meant* to leave you

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and those poor little brats unprovided for. Don't trouble your head about arrangements, Cicely. Hurst was your home in his time, and it's your home now. It was great nonsense your ever going away at all; if my aunt wanted to look after you she should have stopped there to do it."

"But no one knew where we were," explained Annie, who much preferred the patronage implied in bringing back the orphans to having found Cicely still domesticated at Hurst. "Mr. Peter took the management of everything; he had no authority to invite Miss Damer. I think he acted for the best, dear. And, Cicely, *please* don't worry about plans and business; you can't know anything about them. *We* will take care of you; you are not friendless now, my poor darling!" and the little hand, in its tight-fitting black kid, patted Cicely with an air of appropriation and friendly patronage which made her feel half wild, for she rightly interpreted the amused twinkle in Ralph's eyes. He saw "the heroine" was in the toils, and far more fettered by these silken ones of Mrs Annie's than ever she had been under

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her aunt's "stern" rule. There is no knowing what Cicely might have done—a red flush burned on her cheek, her brow was clouded by one of her worst frowns—she might even have astonished her cousins by an outbreak of the "fearful temper" her friends gave her credit for, had not an interruption occurred just in time to prevent a scene.

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CHAPTER XIII.

A SHOCK FOR MR. PETER.

THE whistle sounded—*twice* in rapid succession—and the train suddenly slackened speed.

"Hullo!" said Frank; there was no time to say more before he was thrown forward into his wife's arms and Ralph into those of Cicely, for the ladies were sitting back and the gentlemen opposite to them.

"I *beg* your pardon," said Ralph, politely.

"Don't mention it," said Cicely, with equal politeness, and taking off her crushed hat to try and bend it into shape.

Ralph thrust himself half out of the window.

"A collision: I thought so; well, this is a railway accident, I suppose. The first I ever assisted at. It would be exciting only that it is all over before it began."

Cicely became aware that Frank and Annie had

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not separated again, as Ralph and herself had done after their equally involuntary embrace. Annie was clinging to her husband in a state of abject terror, which for a second of two held her silent, but then her cries and lamentations made themselves heard. She was frightened out of her wits; Frank was absolutely driven to his very first exercise of marital authority to keep her in the carriage at all, and Cicely had enough to do in coaxing and soothing her for the rest of the way. The little difficulty was soon overcome; it had been an accident *averted* for a wonder,—a runaway empty truck, seen in time to prevent serious mischief, though the collision, slight as it had been, suggested to them all what an awful thing one occurring at full speed must be; and even Cicely shuddered at the thought. For the present, however, the little excitement put her own affairs out of her head, and in encouraging and comforting her more cowardly companion she lost the sense of being patronised altogether. There was half-an-hour's delay before the truck could be got rid of and their train proceed, and Ralph got out and walked up and down, coming to the

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window every now and then to report progress or make some absurd remark. Frank did not dare follow his example, feeling morally certain that if he left the carriage his wife would leave it after him, and that no earthly persuasions would induce her to re-enter. Pale, tearful, and altogether miserable, Annie clung alternately to her husband and Cicely, envying the latter her lack of "nerves," while the gentlemen applauded her "common sense." It was a pity that Cicely did so often behave better and more agreeably than those she was with, the sense of such being the case blinded her as to what a thorough little goose she could at times be. She was never *missish* as Ellen Ward was inclined to be, nor cowardly as Mrs. Damer now proved herself; and the admiration of that little person for Cicely's courage, added to the fact that Ralph pronounced her a "brick," and Frank declared she had "too much good sense for a girl and deserved to be something better"(!), restored our heroine not only to a good opinion of herself, but raised her spirits to an unusual degree. It was delightful, too, to find that her present guardians never dreamt of objecting when

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Ralph offered to drive her up in the dog-cart which was waiting for him when they arrived; but thought it the most natural thing in the world that she should accept his offer. How Cicely did exult over the secret consciousness that Miss Joan would never have allowed it, and of how alarmed she would have been, as well as shocked, at such an improper proceeding, when Red Rover rose upon his hind legs, as was his wont, and *chasséed* gaily out of the station!

"Come; this *is* jolly," said Ralph, "something like old times;" and he left the rein loose, not to interfere with the *pas seul* Red Rover was in the habit of executing before putting down his head and going at the Red Hill with a rush.

"Isn't it?" cried Cicely, enthusiastically. "Give me the reins, Ralph."

"No, no; there is never any knowing what may happen when you are to the fore. You can't even get through a railway journey like ordinary mortals, you see; dreadful risky work, this going about with heroines; I'll keep on the safe side, please."

Cicely laughed, and boy and girl drove along

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the old familiar road, where the roses were gone now from the hedges and the aftermath already growing green in the hayfields, both of them as lighted-hearted as they had ever been in the dear old Squire's time, when such drives had been matters of common occurrence. Cicely forgot her troubles, forgot even her children; Ralph never once remembered that he had meant to take advantage of this *tête-à tête* to inflict upon her his deferred lecture,—the lecture which he had informed his mother was to bring the wilful young lady to her senses.

"Miss Joan wouldn't have allowed this, I suppose," he said, "but Mrs. Damer is another matter. I say, Cis, how awfully pretty she is."

"Yes, and *such* a dear!" responded Cicely warmly, for the clinging, coaxing Annie had by her very weakness resumed the old place in her cousin's regard, and contrasted beautifully with her remembrance of Miss Damer. "Oh, how different it will be now! Life at Hurst, and with Frank and Annie instead of thraldom with Aunt Joan."

"There goes old Rogers!" exclaimed Ralph, as they flew past a respectable farmer jogging along

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in a market-cart; "how he does stare! And see, Cis, Mary Bates is looking for a nod from you —just won't they all be glad to have you back again?"

They were turning in at the gate before Cicely bethought herself to ask if any of the family were at the House, and her feelings received a shock when she heard that Mr. Peter was still there.

"At least, I met him yesterday," said Ralph, "and I suppose he'd wait till Captain Damer returned; if the Captain is of my mind Mr. Peter won't wait long afterwards."

"And I'm not expected, and the brougham is miles away!" cried Cicely. "Put me down, Ralph, and let me wait for them. I daren't go in alone."

"Nonsense! Such fun to astonish him. He fancies you safe in the respectable keeping of his worthy sister, and hundreds of miles off, and, behold! you come driving up in this reprehensible manner: returning to the home of your childhood in a triumphant dog-cart! And just when he has on his blandest smile to welcome the bride! I hope he'll have a fit."

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Mischief gained the upper hand; Cicely said no more. The sound of wheels brought Mr. Peter on to the front steps, and he *did* wear his blandest smile; moreover, it was a second or two before he was aware that it was being wasted upon that "impertinent boy," as he called Ralph, and his "very unsatisfactory niece," to say nothing of Red Rover, who plunged at him frantically, as though bent upon dragging the dog-cart up the steps and straight into the front hall. The delay in the arrival of the train had tired out Mr. Peter's patience; he had fallen asleep; suddenly awakened by the noise of wheels, he blinked as he smiled, and it was irresistibly amusing to see the start he gave on recognising Cicely, to see how vainly he struggled to divest his manner on the instant of all blandness and infuse into it the dignified air of disapprobation with which he thought it his duty to regard her. Not that he knew anything, as yet, of this last *escapade* of hers, but he was excessively displeased as well as surprised to see her. For half a moment he had fully believed it was Annie, and though thinking it a decidedly bad beginning to drive up in a dog-cart with a

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"mad animal" in the shafts, he hurried to help her to alight. His sudden pause and change of countenance excited the young people's quick sense of the ludicrous; Ralph roared with laughter, for the life of her Cicely could not help joining. Her re-entrance into the home she had left in such a grandiloquent frame of mind and with so many tears was anything but heroic, but then it was very amusing.

The amusement did not last long, for explanations must be given, and deeply mortified did Cicely feel at the consciousness that each word she spoke was justifying her uncle's opinion of her. A great deal too proud, as well as too truthful, to soften down her narrative or try to make out a good case for herself, she said simply that she and her aunt had differed so much with regard to the management of the children that she had left her and gone up to town, and that Frank and Annie, hearing of her being there, had come to fetch her and had brought her *home;* Cicely emphasized the last word, but all the rejoinder it elicited from Mr. Peter was a cold—

"Indeed!" and he turned to Ralph to ask par-

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ticulars of the accident on the line, treating him with a politeness that was quite overpowering to that young gentleman, who, however much he secretly rebelled against the infliction, understood the pleading look in poor Cicely's eyes far too well to leave her until the little brown brougham, with Annie's bright face, decked now once more in radiant smiles, looking out of the window, made its appearance in the shrubbery. He drove off then, and, slightly to her surprise when she came to think of it that night in her own room, Cicely had no more leisure to brood over her own feelings. Annie kept her fully employed. She ran up and down stairs on messages, she superintended the unpacking, above all she *listened*, and the post of listener to Mrs. Damer was no sinecure. Later, when Cicely had grown more accustomed to it, she learnt how to follow out her own train of thought uninterrupted by the flowing stream of talk, but in these early days, when she conscientiously listened to every word and weighed her own answers—quite a work of supererogation—it was really a strain upon her mind, and by dinner-time the first evening she felt as worn out

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as ever she remembered to have been with a hard day's study.

The gentlemen had not been visible all the afternoon, and Cicely caught herself wondering what account of her behaviour Frank might be giving to her uncle; it appeared, however, when they all met at dinner, that she and her affairs had been too insignificant to occupy their attention at all, for Frank, after helping the fish, seemed suddenly to become aware of her existence, and appealed to Mr. Peter to know what he thought of "Cicely's last."

"I expect she has astonished the old lady; of course I should have had them all back in due time, but it's a good thing Cis didn't wait to be sent for; I shall be so much occupied that it's well Annie has a companion."

"You would be just as much 'occupied' at this time of the year without the workmen or business to see to," said Annie quickly. "Ah! I know; men always are 'occupied' in the shooting season."

Frank laughed, and Cicely hoped his question

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to Mr. Peter might be forgotten, but her uncle was not inclined to spare her; he made his little bow at her across the table as he observed in reply to his nephew,—

"Joan must have regretted such an unusually independent step on the part of any young lady under her care, but those who know Cicely can hardly be much *astonished* at anything she may do."

"You think it a good plan that they should live with us, don't you?" asked Annie, putting on the prettiest little confidential air imaginable; she was very fond of *asking* advice, though just as disinclined to follow it as most people are; "it will be better every way than their living with Miss Damer—such a pleasure to me, you know."

"If you ask me, I do *not* think it a good plan. You and Frank are young;" this time Mr. Peter honoured Annie with his bow; "some definite scheme for the future should, I venture to suggest, be arranged without delay. It is hardly wise to undertake burdens that do not naturally fall to one's share, or—or to undertake personal

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responsibility in difficult cases." And Cicely coloured crimson, as she felt that *she* was the "difficult case."

"What would you do with them, then, if you were us?" said Annie, knitting her pretty brows into a thoughtful frown, while Cicely wondered what held her silent, or why she should sit tongue-tied during this cool discussion as to what was to be "done" with her. She kept her eyes upon her plate and hunted diligently for stray fragments of fish, making that interesting occupation the excuse for not joining in the conversation. Very scornful looks would have flashed upon Mr. Peter from those eyes had they been raised, and if she had spoken at all very hot and hasty words would have escaped her. Why did she hesitate to utter one of her impetuous speeches? Certainly she had never hesitated to edify Miss Joan therewith, had never felt in her presence the leaden weight of constraint that oppressed her now.

Mr. Peter would not commit himself by recommending any definite plan for the future of the orphans; he said it was a matter for Frank's decision; his nephew, he thought, could hardly yet

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be in a position to know what it was in his power to do for his young cousins — at which point Frank interrupted him :—

"But I tell you I *have* decided, they are to live here, and no more about it — that is to say, as long as Cicely and Annie can contrive to hit it off together. When they quarrel I suppose Cis will start off again somewhere or other, back into Hampshire perhaps ; who knows?" and he laughed at her good-humouredly as he drank her health in his first glass of sherry.

His uncle was too polite not to follow the example of his young host : Cicely found herself obliged to meet Mr. Peter's eyes and return his formal "Your good health, my dear niece," with a civil murmur. There was a red spot on each cheek and her eyes shone.

"I must say," remarked Mr. Peter, "that your looks do justice to the care lavished upon you by my sister Joan. I hope you left your young brother and sister as well in health as you appear to be yourself. When do you expect them to rejoin you?"

"As soon as it is convenient to Annie — very

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soon; in a day or two, I suppose;" and poor Cicely gave Mrs. Damer a pleading look, which she however failed to interpret correctly, for she said eagerly,—

"A day or two! Oh, I don't know: we shall hardly be ready for them so soon as that. The nurseries are to be re-papered and whitewashed; and then, while all the workmen are about, the little ones would be sure to get into mischief, and Cicely and I would be too busy to attend to them. Bertie is a little wild, isn't he, love? All boys are, I believe, and want so much looking after. I'm sure *we* don't want to be obliged to whip him;" and she laughed merrily. "Poor, dear little man! I'd rather leave all that to Miss Joan, and make him and Marion just as happy as a fairy tale — let *her* be the ogre, or the wicked old witch, please Cicely, and leave us the *rôle* of 'good genius.' But we must wait till the house is quiet — till Fairyland is ready for the mortals." Annie looked so pretty and winning as she spoke that it was a pity the whole of her speech should have wounded Cicely as it did; for what was it but an excuse for and defence of Miss Damer's

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severity to the children,—the very severity which had driven their sister to desperation? How it annoyed Cicely to perceive that Annie did not see this, and that Mr. Peter *did*, and enjoyed it!

"Ah, yes, I understand," he said, sipping his wine leisurely, "and before Fairyland is ready—a very pretty simile, Mrs. Damer—there will be fully time for Joan to exercise her authority, and bring the young rebels into order, so that they spare the gentle arbitress of their destinies here all pain of chastising them. A sister's heart, too,—another sip of sherry followed by a little bow at his niece—"a sister's heart is naturally soft, and Cicely is too young to have sufficient firmness for"—— His victim had started to her feet, and in doing so nearly knocked down the butler, who was in the act of handing her the potatoes.

"May I go, Annie? I'm tired to death. My head aches."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Damer; "how you bounce about, love! You quite startled me. Go, yes of course. Lie on the sofa in the drawing-room, my poor darling, and ring for coffee, please. I shall be there by the time it is up, for now I

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think of it, *I* am tired to death too; and, Cicely, would you mind telling Martin — my maid, you know——" but Cicely was gone. Mr. Peter looked after her with a very expressive shrug of his shoulders.

"You are undertaking a grave responsibility," he said.

Annie sighed, tried to look anxious and weighed down by her sense of responsibility, failed signally, and said with a beaming smile,—

"She's a *love*, and it's *so* nice to have some one to talk to, and run my messages, and all that, you know."

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CHAPTER XIV.

SUSPENSE.

"Of all silly girls — and there's nothing *so* silly as girls of that age can be if they like — I do think Cicely is the worst! But, to be sure, my Ellen nearly comes up to her," said Mrs. Ward, when she came home and heard what had happened.

She found it hard to console Miss Joan, who laboured under a painful sense of failure, and was besides much more alarmed at Cicely's unprotected state and shocked at her independent behaviour than her friend was.

"I don't think you *have* failed, dear Miss Joan. I feel sure the poor child will learn to appreciate your kindness, and that we shall have her back, quite a reformed character; and if this freak makes her ashamed of herself it will turn out for

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the best after all — a little shame will do Cicely *such* good."

"But — the world judges young girls harshly; what will be said of her?"

"I don't think it does judge them harshly — it is far too lenient where pretty, attractive, clever girls are concerned; and even if it did, *the* world will know nothing, and Cicely's over-particular world is a forgiving one."

"Where can she be? It would greatly relieve my mind to hear. It is so extremely unlikely that Mrs. Maxwell should be in town at this time of year — if Ellen had only——" Miss Joan hesitated to blame Ellen, but Mrs. Ward begged her to "speak her mind."

"She has behaved very badly; pray don't spare her. I will have her in for you to scold," she offered kindly, thinking that perhaps it would do poor Miss Damer good to scold some one; but she would not see Ellen, and went back to her own house to pass a sleepless night, counting the hours which must elapse before it was possible to receive the letter which both she and Mrs. Ward confidently expected on the following morning.

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It was a great addition to her trouble that no letter came! And when the housemaid discovered the envelope containing the bank-notes and brought it to her mistress, that good lady was quite overwhelmed.

"Such imprudence! A sum like this left in a table drawer! No precaution taken! Could there be a clearer proof of how unfit Cicely is to act for herself?"

"Oh, I wouldn't make so much of that," said Mrs. Ward; "it is exactly the careless trick of a girl of her age. I rather like it: it is far more natural than if she *had* 'taken precautions,' and more honest a great deal than if she had carried it off," for Mrs. Ward had heard the history of the ring, and what is more, Miss Ellen had heard her mother's opinion of that piece of business!

Phillis contrived to run over to Miss Joan's at least a dozen times in the course of that long day; Constance sought her out to get advice about some history papers she was writing, and broached the most heterodox opinions with regard to the British constitution in the endeavour to divert Miss Joan's mind from her troubles. The kind

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girls hung about her and did their utmost to cheer her up. It was a pleasure to her also to see how perfectly happy and wonderfully good the children contrived to be without their sister. Even Marion behaved in a most exemplary manner, and Bertram clung to his aunt, evidently bearing no malice at all, though certainly not forgetting his experience of her severity, for he avoided the fatal wall altogether, privately informed Marion that it was a "nasty place," and transferred his whole stablefull of wooden horses from the arbour at that end of the garden to the one opposite. Of course both children asked eager and very awkward questions about Cicely, but neither of them seemed to miss her. Mrs. Ward accounted at once for the delay in hearing from the naughty girl by settling that she had gone to join Mrs. Maxwell at the seaside, or wherever that lady was taking her holiday, and suggested that Miss Damer should not write either to her brother or her nephew till she had more certain information to give them. When the *next* morning came however and still no letter, even Mrs. Ward began to look grave, and Ellen nearly cried herself sick.

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She had not ventured into Miss Joan's sight, but going out to indulge in a flood of tears in the old corner by the water-butt, she saw Martha in the other garden, and heard a piece of news that in her excited state totally upset her. Rushing back to her sister, she burst in upon them, exclaiming,—

"Cicely's dead! oh, what will become of me?"

Constance turned very white and dropped her work; Phillis looked up and only said,—

"What did she die of?" but her voice shook, though she had shrewd suspicions that Ellen was jumping to some conclusion or other, and knew nothing positively.

"How *can* you be so heartless! Oh, my dear, beautiful Cicely! Miss Damer has a telegram—any but bad news would have come by letter."

"Oh!" and Phillis felt quite relieved, "died by telegraph, did she? Nonsense, Conny, don't you see it is only one of Ellen's agonies? Of course, the telegram is from Mrs. Maxwell. I am thankful it has come to set poor Miss Joan's mind at rest."

As we know, the telegram was not from Mrs. Maxwell but from Frank; Mrs. Ward shook her head at the words "C. will write"—she should

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have written before this, she said; and our heroine fell in the estimation of one friend at least.

Miss Damer's *anxieties* were at an end when once she knew her niece to be with her natural protectors, but beyond a few lines to her nephew, saying that she would continue to take charge of the children until another home was offered them and with no allusion at all to their elder sister, she did not feel inclined to enter into any correspondence upon this unsatisfactory affair. Mrs. Ward thought her right. It would be quite time enough for Miss Joan to speak when Cicely had first spoken, and till then silence was the best reproof, and decidedly not undeserved. And silence continued, utter, unbroken — not a line or message did Cicely receive; and still, day after day, she delayed writing, because day after day Annie put off the preparations for receiving the children whose arrival at Hurst seemed as far off as ever. Workmen were in every room in the house — *except* the nurseries — Annie's boudoir was fast growing lovely with blue and gold; the drawing-room was a chaos of scaffolding; even the cosy dining-room was invaded, and the family ate

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in the billiard-room, which would "keep," as Mrs. Damer expressed it, until more important apartments were habitable. Things were so uncomfortable now that clearly the nurseries must wait; it was too much to expect that other work should be delayed for the sake of Marion and Bertram, but Cicely did wish that they had been allowed to occupy the old rooms in the old state, for her heart ached for her children. Several times she began a letter to Ellen Ward, but each time tore it up. Once she wrote to Martha to desire her to send her an account of the little ones, but that also was destroyed. It felt mean to write to any one in Miss Joan's house until she had written to Miss Joan herself, and that Cicely could not bring herself to do. What could she say? She was *not* "with Mrs. Maxwell, earning an honourable independence," she was *not* "in a position to relieve her aunt of the burden she had so generously undertaken,"—sentences which had sounded so dignified and well chosen in the imaginary epistles she had composed as she travelled to town: she had simply run away from a life she disliked to one she preferred, exchanged

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the home Miss Joan had offered, for one of her own choosing, leaving to her aunt all the trouble of her little brother and sister. This was the plain truth. If she wrote at all it must be to apologise, and Cicely was not nearly ready to apologise yet. She was exceedingly surprised to find in what a different light every one seemed to regard her conduct from that in which it appeared to herself. When Frank alluded to the matter at all he spoke of it as "Cicely's row with my aunt;" her uncle's opinion she was well aware of; but perhaps what astonished her most of all was the welcome she met with at Bennington on the occasion of her first visit there.

Cicely had hoped to see Mrs. Morland the day after that on which they had all returned to Hurst, but Annie could not spare her, and coaxed her so prettily not to leave her alone that it was impossible to resist. It was not till the following afternoon that Cicely could make her escape, and even then started under promise of being back by tea-time.

"Frank is sure not to be home till late—they don't leave off shooting till they can't see any

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longer, and I shall die of low spirits if I am alone after dark—no books or nothing; Mudie's box hasn't come, you know."

"There's heaps of books in the library."

"Such stupid old things—new novels are what I like. And the library is full of whitewash—the whole house is full of whitewash—the very food tastes of it. I can't think why we came here with the place in such a state. We might have stayed in town and gone to the theatres—only, to be sure, no one is in town in September."

"And Frank wished to be on the spot to superintend the improvements."

"He wished to be on the spot to shoot partridges," said Annie. "Well, if you *must* go, the sooner you set off the sooner you will be back; and I've ordered a cake, hot out of the oven, for tea at five o'clock"—Mrs. Damer was fond of nice unwholesome things—"*I* shan't go to Bennington, you know, till Mrs. Morland has called here, or else we might have driven over together."

"The Jewels only went to the forge to-day;

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they have been out at grass — that was Mr. Peter's doing;" and Cicely tossed her head scornfully.

"Oh, my darling, I dare say it was all right: gentlemen understand stable arrangements. We shall have such nice drives by-and-by; you'll like that, won't you? I shall be so glad to have some one to go with me — men hate pony-carriages; you need never be afraid of my taking Frank and leaving you alone — I will have you always, and you shall drive sometimes."

Annie was growing patronising; Cicely stopped her abruptly with a kiss; the Jewels had been Cicely's own once, and it was not pleasant to be reminded so pointedly that they were hers no longer. As she walked towards Bennington Cicely found herself wondering that she should feel her changed position more now than she had done with Miss Damer. She decided that it arose from the old surroundings, amongst which she now found herself and which naturally kept the memory of old times more constantly before her.

"Of course the things all *are* Annie's now, and and it's silly of me to mind it," she said to her-

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self as she pushed open the shrubbery gate at Bennington and ran up to the house, for she had no time to spare if she was to be back at Hurst by five o'clock.

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CHAPTER XV.

THE BENNINGTON BOYS.

Of course the boys saw Cicely before she had time to ring the bell. How natural and like old times it felt to see them come pouring out, Roger, as usual, falling headlong over the scraper, and mingling his groans of pain with the shouts of triumph in which he joined, the others dancing a war-dance round the visitor.

"Ralph said you were come. Three cheers for Cicely!"

"Oh, jolly! are you glad to get away from the female griffin? *We* won't let you go again in a hurry."

"Welcome — oh! my knee! — welcome home! Cis, I say, do ask Captain Damer to let me go out shooting with him."

"You're come to stop dinner, of course — look

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here, Cis, just run round to the stables with me and see my ferret, *do* now: there's heaps of time."

"Oh, and my jackdaw! Mother won't let him live in the house ——"

"I should think not!" indignantly from the tallest boy; "get out of the way, you fellows; you'll knock Cicely down amongst you. It *is* fine to have you back — come, boys, stand off now, and just give one decent cheer."

Cicely put her hands to her ears.

"I've come to see your mother; the ferret must wait, Dick; so must the jackaw, Tom: yes, indeed, Hal, I *am* glad to be back, but that's no reason you should be so rude as to call my aunt names; I'll ask about the shooting, Roger, but you'll have to mend your knee first; they were making quite noise enough without that last cheer, Frederick, but oh dear, oh dear!" and Cicely turned laughing towards the boys and stretched out her hands in a vain attempt to shake hands with all eight at once. "I *do* like noise, and I've heard none for so long! You dear old fellows, I *am* glad to see you all again!"

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"There; that will do," said Frederick, highly gratified; "you might be content with that, lads, and now — *disperse!*" a command his brothers forthwith obeyed, for Fred was a great man in their world, second only to Ralph himself. Tom chose, as he said, to "disperse upon the banisters," where from his post on the rail he could watch Cicely to the very door of the drawing-room, following her with a most absurd pantomime expressive of his delight at her reappearance amongst them; the others retreated into the garden, to keep a look-out for her when she should leave the house; there was a lull in the noise, to which, however, Mrs. Morland was so much accustomed that she had hardly noticed it.

Flushed with exercise and pleasure, looking her very best, and making sure of as warm a welcome from the mother of the boys as she had received from the boys themselves, Cicely was considerably taken aback to be greeted with a cool —

"Oh, it's you is it, young lady? Ashamed of yourself, I hope?"

Now Cicely was not at all ashamed of herself.

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The colour mounted to her brow, but it was never of any use to be dignified with Mrs. Morland, and the girl felt herself drawn into the old kind embrace, even while the obnoxious words were repeated: "Ashamed of yourself, eh? My dear, it was an outrageous thing to do."

"Why?" It was all Cicely could contrive to say.

"Unladylike to begin with; an ignorant little servant-maid, who didn't like her first place and was afraid to give warning, might have run away, but *you!*"

Cicely's cheeks burned.

"I thought you'd be kind—glad to see me."

"So I am, very glad to see you always, but—has anyone scolded you yet? Ah, I thought not—then, you see, *I* must do it; after that I'll be as kind as you like. Ralph was quite annoyed, I can tell you, my dear."

"Ralph! he never said so. And if you knew how the children—my poor little motherless ones!—were treated——"

"Oh, I know; Miss Damer whipped Bertram for risking his own life, didn't she? Now tell me

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honestly, Cicely, was she in the habit of beating them, or was it only once in a way, and well deserved?"

Cicely was obliged to confess, and by judicious questions was convicted out of her own mouth of having run away in a fit of temper from an aunt who had never interfered with her management of the children except in that one instance, and who had shown both them and herself the utmost kindness.

"But I would so infinitely prefer independence for myself and the little ones," murmured Cicely, driven to fall back upon Mrs. Maxwell; "and it was impossible to explain in writing; I think that was what made me go to Stanhope Street without giving notice; it was unfortunate that I chose the wrong time; if I had only waited ten days longer School would have reopened, and then, Mrs. Morland, you would not have been teased by my coming here and Ralph would not have been 'annoyed.'"

"It was most *fortunate*, I think, that you did not find Mrs. Maxwell at home! A prim, proper governess! Why, my dear, what a little goose

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you must be to suppose she would even have allowed you to associate with her 'young ladies' after committing such an imprudence! You would have shocked the poor thing beyond words. *You* a pupil-teacher in a select girls' school! Such an example of independence and defiance of authority set up before her pattern young ladies. No, indeed, Cicely, it was well for poor Mrs. Maxwell's feelings that she was spared such a shock."

"Aunt Joan had no 'authority;' no one has now," said Cicely, catching at the word; "I am my own mistress."

"More's the pity," said Mrs. Morland, dryly; "and now you know my opinion of what you *have* done, and, moreover, I tell you plainly what you *ought* to do—go home and write an apology to Miss Damer at once. And now, dear, we'll have tea and be comfortable. Get your own low chair and ring the bell; we'll send for the boys, they'll never forgive me if I banish them altogether. Ralph, as I suppose you know, is out with Captain Damer; you must wait till he is home, that he may walk back with you."

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It was a pity Cicely could not stay, everything was so pleasant and friendly. Tom, still faithfully perched on the banisters, passed the word to his brothers. The room soon swarmed with boys, jokes flew about; merry speeches, laughter, resounded on all sides. There was so much to tell and to hear. The lives and adventures of countless pets, school scrapes, the results of cricket-matches and boat-races, accidents of all sorts, were narrated by the boys; some sitting at Cicely's feet, one or two settled on the back of their mother's sofa, who sewed placidly in their midst. Frederick strolling up and down the room while he talked, now and then knocking down a china ornament or upsetting a chair; Roger lying full length upon the rug, and little Hugh claiming his privilege as youngest to climb upon Cicely's lap, and sit there beaming upon his brothers. Then, by-and-by, Cicely began to describe the Forest, with its grand old trees; to tell of the miles and miles of trees — nothing to be seen but green branches and fern, greener still, waving and whispering in the summer air. It was so

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strange, she told them, that soft, low song that seemed never to end, but now and then to swell out into loud rustling noise as the wind rose and then died away again into the old low whisper; but the Forest was never silent quite. She spoke of the heather, with its lovely tints, contrasting so beautifully with the universal green—of the deep, cool shade, alternating with wide tracts where the sun shone fiercely down during the day, but where at evening it was so cool and fresh. She described the glow-worms gleaming on the fern-leaves at night, and the vipers which she dreaded so much on the hot August days. Her hearers grew silent as she went on. Mrs. Morland dropped her work, and sat listening to the clear, young voice, and watching the changing colour in the pretty face; the boys hung upon every word—but suddenly Cicely started to her feet.

"The cake hot out of the oven! Oh, what o'clock is it? I must go. I promised Annie to be back to tea."

"Just a quarter to five. Nasty unwholesome,

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thing," said Mrs. Morland, her last words being in reference to the delicacy provided by Mrs. Damer for her own and Cicely's delectation.

"It's jolly good," observed Tom, meditatively.

"*Nothing's* good that takes Cicely away," cried Fred gallantly, and offering his escort in place of Ralph's, who had not yet returned.

One warm kiss from Mrs. Morland, who alluded no more to Cicely's late behaviour—she had said her say, and it was not her habit to weaken the effect of her lectures by reiteration—and the girl was gone, running at full speed down the road, pursued and surrounded by half-a-dozen boys; for Hugh's fat little legs had failed him in the shrubbery, and Roger's knee kept him bewailing his hard fate upon the doorstep. It was a funny procession that Ralph met halfway between Bennington and Hurst: the one young lady and her six attendant squires, all too breathless to talk, though by that time the "run" had degenerated into a jog-trot that the lads could have kept up for hours; poor Cicely, however, being heartily glad of an excuse to stop.

Ralph fired off his gun to the admiration of

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his brothers, gave it to Fred to carry home, and held out his arm to Cicely to see her safe to Hurst.

"Mrs. Annie's in a fine way, Cis," he began.

"Cake cooling, I suppose. Well, I can't help it!"

"Oh, I don't know about cooling. Mr. Peter was doing his best to keep it warm when I came away — there 'll be none left if you don't make haste. When *is* that fellow going?"

"I'm sure I don't know. He flatters Annie, Annie likes anyone who flatters her; anyone Annie likes will stay at Hurst just as long as they please."

"Then, I'm sure I hope she'll like you!"

"I'm not afraid of her disliking me," said Cicely, adding, with a little hesitation, "Ralph, your mother said you were 'annoyed' at my having left Miss Damer—at my having *run away!*" she went on bravely, for she really wanted to know what he thought. "Why was that? and *were* you?"

"Was I *what?*" asked Ralph, evading the direct reply to a question he wished she had not asked.

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"*Annoyed!* and if you were, why should you have been?"

"Well," and Ralph stopped to pull down a cluster of autumn berries, for he did not like to look her in the face; "it was not exactly *nice* of you, you know!"

How Cicely's cheeks glowed! She had never felt so mortified in her life before. She had no inclination to put further questions, or ask her companion for his definition of what *was* "nice" for a young lady; something in his tone kept her silent. Ralph put into her hand the crimson berries, with their glistening leaves, and asked her to wear them in her hair that evening; at which she laughed, being suddenly reminded that she had no "things," as Annie would say.

"I suppose my box will come some time or other, but at present dressing for dinner is an impossibility. Don't come any further, Ralph; thanks, but I like to walk up the avenue alone." She was glad to be taken at her word; for Ralph said good-bye at once, and she went up the avenue by herself, pondering over Mrs. Mor-

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land's scolding, and her son's few words of disapproval.

"But they don't know Aunt Joan; they never lived with her. Oh, Uncle Bertram! Uncle Bertram! *why* did you leave me?" poor Cicely caught herself speaking aloud as she paused for a moment before entering the house. She longed to hear of the children; if only Miss Joan would write, Cicely felt she could answer the letter—but to write first was beyond her. Pushing open the hall-door, she was aware of her box standing grim and black in the twilight—it had been despatched soon after Frank's telegram was received—her box and nothing more. Some letters lay on the hall-table, the white squares showing plainly in the gathering gloom, and Cicely bent down eagerly to read the addresses; but they were all for Frank, and she turned away with a sigh. In the drawing-room Mr. Peter and Annie were discussing the hot cake.

"No letter for you!" said the latter; "unforgiving old cat—why don't she write? Never mind, dear love; come and be comfortable, and

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by-and-by we'll send for the little ones, and snap our fingers at Aunt Joan. You don't mind, do you, Mr. Peter?" beaming upon him sweetly as she put sugar in his cup; "it's not respectful to you, I know, to talk so of your sister, but it's only me. Mr. Peter has been telling me such lots about old times, Cicely; more than Frank ever did—quite interesting. I was quite surprised to see you back so soon, and I thought I should be lonely; didn't I? Is it really five o'clock?"

"Past six," said Cicely shortly, turning away to go to her own room. She might just as well have stayed at Bennington, she thought—Annie did not want her. It did not improve her temper to find the unfortunate diamond ring restored to its old place among her possessions.

"She's found the money, then; but she *might* have written. To send it back without one word after all that passed! she *is* an 'unforgiving old cat.' I won't trouble my head about her any more."

Cicely put Ralph's crimson berries in her hair, and took more pains than usual with her evening

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toilet. She was so gay at dinner, that Frank informed his wife later, that "Cis was an immense acquisition, and he'd no idea a bread-and-butter Miss could be such good company." Annie herself, easily pleased and amused, made much of the girl; and if Mr. Peter looked grim, showing plainly that he saw through his niece's forced spirits, Cicely would not notice it; but made jokes, gave absurd descriptions of the Bennington boys, of Hampshire croquet-parties, caricatured Mrs. Mox, and really interested even her uncle by her account of forest-life, the rate of wages in that part of the world, and much that she had contrived to pick up of the state of agricultural labour in the south.

"How happy and merry we are!" said Annie comfortably to her husband, after Cicely had gone to bed, and Mr. Peter had retired into the smoking-room; "it will be almost a pity when the children come to interrupt us, and she's forgetting them—don't you think so? Yes, dear, go and have your cigar, to be sure—only don't be late, or I shall get *so* nervous thinking the house is on fire, with all that whitewash about."

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"Whitewash is not *very* inflammable."

"Oh, you know what I mean—scaffolding and things; and I say, Frank, don't you agree with me that Cicely's quite happy without those tiresome babies?" but Frank was gone.

Cicely was just then kneeling by the bed in her own room, and crying as if her heart would break.

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CHAPTER XVI.

LETTERS AT LAST.

"ANNIE! only listen to this! They've sent Lady Bess in the light cart. Frank never can have meant it. I'm sure it was not by his orders."

"Good gracious! why didn't she have the brougham?" exclaimed Mrs. Damer, considerably dismayed at such a vehicle for so aristocratic a personage. "Frank never told me anyone was coming; I wish he'd give me notice when he asks people. I never so much as heard her name till this moment. Will she bring a maid, do you think, Cicely? I'm sure there's nothing to laugh at!" for Cicely, in spite of the state of indignation in which she had entered the room, had thrown herself upon the sofa in an

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uncontrollable paroxysm of mirth at Annie's comical mistake.

"A groom waits on her," she said, as soon as speaking was possible, "not a maid; her ladyship is rubbed down every morning. Oh, Annie! it's Uncle Bertram's dear old mare, and she *never* goes in harness. I suspect it is Mr. Peter's doing, and I wish you would interfere."

"And I'm sure I wish you would *not*," said Annie, sharply, re-establishing herself in her arm-chair, and picking up her fallen book. "What can it matter to you whether one of our horses is ridden or driven?"

"It matters to me because Uncle Bertram loved Lady Bess, and I can't bear to see her ill-used," answered Cicely, sadly. "I don't believe Frank would like it either. You know he was vexed when Mr. Peter stopped the Jewels' three-feeds a-day without his leave; and that was only because Mr. Peter was afraid to drive them when they were well fed ——"

"Dear love," said Annie, plaintively, "if you would only see that—*things*, are no affair of yours now! You do put yourself in such a fuss.

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Why, the way you rushed in just now! it's like living in the house with a whirlwind. So impetuous, Mr. Peter says, and I'm sure it's true."

Cicely checked the answer rising to her lips; it was not worth while to vex Annie. Going to the window, she stood looking out at the falling rain and the dull grey sky. The weather suited her present mood. Never had she felt so dull, or so oppressed by a sense of constraint. The discipline was perhaps good for her, but it was none the pleasanter for having been self-chosen. She wondered why it was impossible now to speak out without fear of consequences, as she had hitherto done all her life. No one had the semblance of authority over her; yet she had learnt so greatly to dread Mrs. Damer's plaintive reproaches, that she was a very different Cicely from the impulsive one that had thought it thraldom to live with Miss Joan. In point of fact she had not half the liberty at Hurst that she had enjoyed in Hampshire. This very morning she had been occupied almost entirely with household affairs for Annie; and then she was always expected to be in readiness as a listener, or to find

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amusement for her cousin when time hung heavy; and though that was easy enough, for she was readily amused, and at times really affectionate and clinging to Cicely; yet, when discontented or annoyed, she did not hesitate to remind the girl indirectly of her dependence, and show that her attentions were claimed more as a right than a favour. It was only for a time, of course, and Frank was always kind; but he was too much occupied, between shooting and necessary business, to spare time for a real talk with her—indeed he seemed to take it quite as a matter of course that she was established at Hurst for the rest of her life. More than once he had declared that there must be some memorandum of his father's wishes with regard to the orphans, if only he could disinter it from amongst the mass of papers in the study. Any wish expressed by the Squire, Frank said he should feel exactly as binding upon him as a will, and Cicely besought him to search. The study was the only spot in the house still in absolutely the same state in which it had been left at the Squire's death, and a very untidy state Annie thought it.

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She wanted it fitted up with all the modern improvements, in the way of writing-tables, desks, and chairs; but Frank would hear of nothing but the old furniture that had been brought there by his father when the house was bought. "So shabby and old-fashioned," said his wife. But, whatever went on in the rest of the house, the study must remain untouched. And when she pouted at his decision, he put his arm round her waist, as they stood together in the doorway,—

"See, Annie," he said, "in that shabby, old-fashioned chair my father was sitting the last time I saw him. He called me back after we had said good-bye — you know he was not well that day, and we took leave of him here — and it was to say, 'She's a pretty little thing; take care of her.'" Whereupon Annie smiled, told her husband that he was "a dear, romantic boy," and promised the study should never be meddled with.

Cicely secretly hoped any memorandum that might be found would be to the effect that the home of the orphans was still to be at Hurst,

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so that Annie would have to understand that they were not received there on suffrance only. She was thinking of this as she stood in the window, not listening with much attention to the good advice — second-hand from Mr. Peter — which Annie continued to pour forth in her softest voice,— the voice in which she always contrived to say the most irritating things. Cicely liked her much better when she was honestly cross and snappish; but at last, though rather trying *not* to hear the gentle flow of words, she became aware that the speaker had wandered from "your Uncle Peter" to "your Aunt Lady Stanner."

"I think it will be rather nice to collect them all together. At least not all, for of course that cross Miss Joan will not come if we ask her even, and we don't want *her;* do we, dear love?"

"All?" asked Cicely, turning round, and giving full attention now: "who are coming?"

"Why, Lady Stanner and the girls, and Mrs. Hart—*he* can't get away. You know we must

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not have strangers while we are in black, and it's so dull all by ourselves; if it wasn't for you, darling, I should have died of it by now."

"Are they asked?" said Cicely, the fast-rising colour alone betraying her remembrance of how impossible Annie had thought it to find house-room for Marion and Bertie.

"Yes, of course. I thought you were in the room when I read Frank the answers ——"

"And my Aunt Hart's children, I suppose; though you won't have my poor little ones?"

"It isn't 'won't;' how can you be so unkind, Cicely? I long for the darlings, you know I do; and Mrs. Hart's children are *not* coming—so there now!" the last words spoken with all the emphasis of an unanswerable argument.

"Then you can fill the house with guests, although you thought it impossible to have Marion and Bertram while the repairs were going on," remarked Cicely, quietly.

"Do you suppose Lady Stanner and Mrs. Hart, or the two girls—*they* were asked for your sake—will knock over the pails of whitewash, or get

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messing with it, and break their legs climbing about the scaffolding, as your little brother would?" asked Annie triumphantly.

"And they are to sleep in the rooms unfit for the children, then?"

"Don't you *see?* Marion and Bertram are to *live* here. I would not think of settling them into the rooms in their present state, only just to unsettle them again to have the rooms 'done;' but guests may just as well occupy them for a few days *before* they are put in order for your dear pets."

"Annie, should you mind if I went to stay at Bennington till I have arranged with Mrs. Maxwell?"

The question was abruptly put. Mrs. Damer stared for a full minute before she quite took it in, and answered slowly,—

"Oh, Mrs. Maxwell again! Dear me, Cicely, I thought you had forgotten all that. Yes, I should mind it dreadfully, it would *look* so."

"Look how? What do you mean?" asked Cicely, with impatience.

"Look as if you couldn't be happy with *any*

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of your relations, and run away from us all in turn."

That speech *was* unanswerable, Cicely did not give Annie credit for cleverness enough to see how much so; she turned once more to the window, and it was a welcome interruption to the train of thought engrossing her when the afternoon post was brought in. To her surprise there was a letter for her, but it bore the London post-mark, and turned out to be from Mrs. Maxwell, not from her aunt, as for one moment she had hoped was the case.

Mrs. Maxwell began by apologising for her long silence. "I should have written immediately on my return to town," she said, "since I am much at a loss to imagine to what I owe your visit, and might fear that my absence had been a sad inconvenience to you if Mrs. Mox had not informed me of your being safe under the protection of your cousins Captain and Mrs. Damer. Hearing that, I delayed writing, for you can have little idea of the multifarious matters claiming attention ere we settle down once more to our ordinary peaceful routine. Now, however, I con-

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fess, that curiosity resumes its sway, and I hope to hear some explanation of your mysterious appearance in Stanhope Street. Greatly was I grieved to have missed a visit from you, for, although almost strangers to each other personally, I have a vivid and most affectionate remembrance of your dear mother. I had heard with pain of your sad loss, and that your estimable aunt had come forward at once with the noble generosity that has always distinguished her, to replace to you the friend who has 'gone before.' I sincerely hope that it was not on account of any indisposition of hers that you sought my poor hospitality when in town. Pray let me hear of your welfare and of that of your sweet and interesting young charges, and hoping that when you are again in town you will not fail to afford me the great gratification of seeing you, I remain your sincere friend."

Cicely's face as she came to the end of this epistle was a study, or would have been had anyone had leisure to study it, but Annie was engrossed with her own letters and took no notice. Cicely had but a dim and distant remembrance of her mother's *ci-devant* governess, not having seen

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her since her mother's removal to Hurst; and the impression she now received was not one to encourage her to bestow her confidence upon Mrs. Maxwell or to indulge in any reasonable hope of her assistance in carrying out her views for an independent career. She felt extremely puzzled how to answer the good lady, and very uncomfortably certain that Mrs. Morland had judged rightly and that the worthy governess, far from "understanding" Cicely's "high-minded impulses," would be thoroughly shocked and startled at her late behaviour. Doubting, and wondering what answer it would be best to send, Cicely sent none. She allowed the days to slip by one after another, at times in extravagantly high spirits, at others so dull and listless that Annie heartily wished her back in Hampshire, and always with a certain lurking consciousness that it was decidedly inconvenient to be her own mistress, and would be ten thousand times more comfortable in the present crisis of affairs to be forced to submit to some lawful authority.

The day came at last on which the expected guests were to arrive at Hurst, and a pouring wet

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day it was. When the carriages had gone to the station, and Mr. Peter with them, gallantly regardless of his own comfort in his wish to welcome the ladies and be their escort home, Cicely stole out into the long corridor leading from the reception-rooms to the study and the steward's room, which were near each other, both opening by side-doors on to the park. The deep window-seats in this passage had of old been favourite seats of hers. How many hours she had passed there as a child, curled up in one of them with a book in her lap, but every now and then glancing out over the park, ready to throw the book away and dash through the study-door the first moment the figure of the Squire should be visible riding slowly homewards. How painfully the remembrance of his loving greeting came across her mind to-day! Her heart ached for the children, she felt thoroughly unhappy, but perhaps was slowly —very slowly—beginning to have a faint glimmer of the reason why.

"Undisciplined!" she said to herself as she leant her forehead against the glass, on the other side of which the rain-drops streamed down,

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making the blotted, indistinct landscape without more blotted and indistinct still; "that is what Aunt Joan called me, and yet, if circumstances can discipline I'm sure mine have been trying enough to make a saint perfect. Oh, if only darling uncle could come back to me they would see what sort of submission I *can* yield when love, not duty, claims it! Those children!—those children!" and Cicely's fast-falling tears kept the rain-drops company.

It was too wet for even Frank to go out. He was in the study; the door stood open and the slight sounds he made from time to time, opening and shutting drawers, rustling papers, pushing back his chair or drawing it up to the table, reached Cicely's ears where she sat. Presently he came to the doorway and stood there, holding something in his hand.

"Cis!" he called, "see here—this should be yours;" and then, as, unwilling to be found in tears, she did not come to him, Frank came to her, and placed a small, old-fashioned, leather writing-case beside her.

"It was your mother's; I don't know just what's

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in it, but it's clearly more yours than mine. It is no end sad, Cicely, looking over the dear old father's things."

"Have you found anything about us?" she asked, with a dawning hope that in the old place where she had so often watched for his home-coming the Squire was about to speak at last and fix where her home should be.

But Frank shook his head.

"If you come across anything there you think concerns me, or rather anything that does *not* concern you," he said, "let me have it, but they seem all your mother's papers."

Then he went back to the study, and left Cicely alone with the falling rain and her mother's old desk.

Letters, nothing but letters—yes, here was a lock of her own hair, the name and date written on the paper containing it; then came a bundle of bills, unpaid; well she knew that duplicates of them receipted might be found amongst uncle Bertram's papers. The letters from him Cicely read eagerly, dwelling upon every word, dashing the blinding tears from her eyes impatiently, and

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holding the sheets close to the rain-mottled window in order to catch the light. There were very few of these, however, and she looked rather more hastily through the next packet, which was from Miss Joan. Hastily as she looked Cicely saw enough to account for any rumours she had heard of Miss Damer's generosity to her sister. There was a great deal that Cicely hardly understood about money "sold out" by her aunt and made over to her mother, and other letters that gave her a painful impression of her mother having been more grasping than grateful,—an impression *so* painful to Cicely to receive that she tied up the packet again with the impatient feeling that she could not even find Aunt Joan out in a kind action without the discovery being in some way or other annoying to her. There were a few loose letters and papers still left, but as she was turning them over, the sound of wheels was heard, and Frank, glad to be released from his melancholy occupation, strode past her down the passage,—

"There they are! Come along, Cis, and say 'how d'ye do.'"

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But Cicely had no intention of appearing until she was obliged to do so. She gathered up her treasures, intending to wait till everyone was in the drawing-room and then effect her escape to her own room. As she waited a servant, catching sight of her in her window-seat, came towards her with a letter which had arrived for her by the afternoon mail.

Cicely's heart beat as she recognised her Aunt's writing.

"At last!" she thought as she opened it, unable to resist a little feeling of pleasure, although fully prepared for any amount of scolding, or rather *worse* than "scolding," for any amount of dry, unsympathetic advice for the future and sedate reproof for the past.

"My dearest Child."

What a strangely unexpected beginning! So strange and unexpected that Cicely could hardly believe her eyes, and, determined to run no risk of interruption, fled away to her own room at once to read her letter there in peace.

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CHAPTER XVII.

MR. PETER IS KEPT WAITING FOR HIS DINNER.

"Of all untidy young ladies as ever I see!" sighed Mrs. Martin, Annie Damer's maid, as she moved hither and thither in Cicely's room, engaged in the very necessary business of "setting things straight" there,—"A shoe one place and its fellow in another, and I'm sure my back aches stooping after 'em—a body might as well go gleaning as wait upon Miss Cicely. Them papers, too, such confusion;" Mrs. Martin's well-pricked fore-finger stirred up cautiously the littered heap half in, half out of the old-fashioned writing-case; "old things seemingly, addressed to the poor lady dead and gone;" but at that moment the sharp eyes fell upon a letter lying face downwards upon the floor, and, in spite of her back-ache, Mrs. Martin stooped once again.

"My dearest Child," the letter began, but as

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the sharp eyes read further they opened wider and wider, till at the last word Mrs. Martin exclaimed,—

"Well, to think of that now! I always did hold as orphans was *interesting* to live with. Poor dear young lady!" with which she replaced the letter face downwards on the floor where she had found it, and softly left the room.

Annie felt very much aggrieved that Cicely had not thought fit to come and welcome the new arrivals.

"Not even at tea-time!" she cried; "I'm sure I shan't send any up. And she knows your daughters were asked to meet her, Lady Stanner. It's very rude of her not to come down."

"Rather an improvement on old times when the little chit used to receive and make us welcome as though she were mistress of the house. I dare say she'll come if you send for her," said Mrs. Hart.

"Well, she *was* mistress in those days," remarked Frank, good-humouredly.

"Ah, yes," interrupted Lady Stanner, "and now, poor dear, she feels the change, of course."

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"She 'feels' *cross*," snapped Annie; "but she *might* come and pour out tea."

"Let me do that and save you the trouble," said Leila Stanner prettily, while her sister, who seemed to have inherited much of her Aunt Hart's decision of character, was doing it already, and presently brought a nicely sugared cup to Annie's side.

"Intractable, I suppose," murmured Lady Stanner softly, and apparently engrossed in the effort to balance her spoon successfully on the edge of her tea-cup; but as soon as Annie fairly understood that her ladyship was still alluding to Cicely, she affirmed that she was a "great darling, and she couldn't exist without her." Annie's good-humour always returned when she was comfortable.

The rain continued to fall outside, inside the ladies sipped their tea and made acquaintance with each other, the gentlemen went off together to the study, it grew dark, the lamp was brought in, earlier than usual owing to the weather,—and still no Cicely. Dressing-time came, the bed-room doors shut upon little Mrs. Damer and her guests, and there was silence in the house during the

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half-hour devoted to the mysteries of the toilette. But as they left their rooms the ladies met upon the landing, and Annie, with her hand upon Cicely's door, exclaiming,—

"Now, really, Cicely must show herself, and we'll all go down together," threw it open.

No one was there; the room was in darkness.

"Gone down already," said Annie, crossly.

But just then Mrs. Martin passed with a candle in her hand, and the light revealed the fact that the room was in precisely the same condition as that in which she had last left it. Cicely's evening dress lay untouched upon the bed, the letters were still half in, half out of the leather writing-case upon the table, the toilette candles had not been lit at all that evening.

"Sulking; means neither to dress nor come down," pronounced Mrs. Hart, strong in her previous experience of Cicely and her ways.

Frank came from his dressing-room, called over the balusters to the servants waiting below, for dinner was by this time ready, to know if the young lady was in the drawing-room, and Mrs.

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Martin ventured to raise a letter from the floor, and holding it as far as possible from her averted eyes—what good servant ever casts a glance upon a written page?—remarked to her mistress,—

"Here's somethink of a paper, ma'am; it might be as well if you was to take it, perhaps ——"

"Run away again, by Jove!" shouted Frank, joining the party, who all now crowded into the room; "had the Jewels put to five minutes after you all got here, and drove off the back-way to the station. Run away, as I'm a sinner!" and deliberately sitting down in the middle of the delicate grenadine flounces spread out upon the bed, he indulged in a hearty fit of laughter, while the ladies stared at him, and Martin hovered round, laying a timid hand upon the grenadine, though not daring to drag her master off it by main force, as she would have liked to do.

"What was it this time?" asked Frank as soon as he could speak, "did you and Cis have a fight, eh, Annie?"

"Impossible!" ejaculated Mr. Peter, who, too

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polite to enter the sanctuary of a young lady's private apartment, stood grimly in the doorway.

"Read the letter," suggested Mrs. Hart, "it's from Joan, I see;" and Annie did as she was bid.

"My dearest Child,

"I grieve to have bad news to communicate. Little Marion is ill, and I dare not conceal from you that her life is in danger. It is a severe attack of inflammation on the lungs. The case is not *entirely hopeless*, and knowing well what your own wishes will be, I shall send to Southampton to meet the midday train on Thursday (the earliest by which you will be able to arrive), with orders to Jacob to wait for the next, in case you are in any way delayed. My poor child! no words of mine can soften this blow to you, so I say no more, and will only add, what I am sure you well know, that everything it is possible for care, love, and watchfulness to do for your little sister shall be done, by her, and your affectionate Aunt,

"JOAN DAMER."

As the last word died on Annie's lips, they looked at each other in silent dismay.

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Bad news coming unexpectedly! How it breaks into the ordinary current of our lives! It is like a voice from another world suddenly stilling all voices here, bidding jarring sounds cease; saying "Hush, be silent, listen." For a moment Annie wondered at her wayward displeasure against Cicely; it seemed petty now; her aunts forgot their harsh judgment of her in pity for the sorrow shadowing her path; for a moment even Mr. Peter softened at this message from a dying bed. The rain dashed against the window; a sudden gust of wind caused the flame of the candle in Martin's hand to flicker in the draught of the open door, and to throw strange shadows upon the ceiling. In certain minds solemn impressions are short-lived; often, it seems as if they were dissipated by the first spoken word. It was so now.

"Poor little Marion dying!" said Lady Stanner, and the tongues were set free at once; the voices hushed for a moment by that solemn voice made themselves heard again.

"Dead by this time probably," said Mrs. Hart, "it ends quickly with young children — one way or the other."

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"Oh! let's hope it is the 'other!'" said her eldest niece; the two young girls had listened awe-struck to the reading of Miss Damer's note. They had heard much of Cicely, and had hoped to "get some fun out of her;" the beginning had seemed promising, and it had shocked and sobered them to hear of this grief in the life of a girl like themselves.

"And she's gone off in all this rain, poor inconsiderate love!" sighed her ladyship.

"Why didn't she ask leave?" questioned Miss Leila, innocently.

"You don't know her, my darling," answered her mother, in the old tone of softly implied reproach.

"Leave!" cried Frank, "why *should* she ask it? But I'd have gone with her, poor little soul!"

"Of course you would!" exclaimed his wife, her feelings relieving themselves in tears. "My poor darling! It will kill her, I know. Oh, that hateful Miss Joan!"

"Nonsense, Annie!" and Frank, grave enough, now took the letter from her hand and re-read it thoughtfully; "it's a kind note, but I'm afraid

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there was not much hope, or the old lady wouldn't have put it so strongly. Why didn't she telegraph, I wonder?"

"In those sort of cases—with children of that age"—said the practical Mrs. Hart, "change is so rapid. If Marion was alive at the time, by which Cicely could have reached her if summoned by a telegram, Marion is alive now, that's certain. Joan generally knows what she is about. There can have been very little hope indeed when she wrote that letter."

"Oh, no hope at all!" sobbed Annie; "she's dead I'm sure, and Cicely will never be happy again—alone in all this rain too—and the trains—quite across London you know, from one station to the other—couldn't we go after her,—or,—or *something*?"

"No good going *after* her," said Frank, sadly. "I know I wish I'd gone with her. What a hare-brained creature it is to rush off alone like this!"

"Then suppose—hadn't we better——" Annie sobbed more than ever; "don't you think if we all went down to dinner?"

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Mrs. Hart welcomed the suggestion. Annie wiped her eyes, and led the way downstairs, followed by her husband, with Lady Stanner on one arm, and the old leather writing-case under the other.

"Her mother's letters, you know," he explained. "I only gave them to her this afternoon, and now I'll take care of them again for her, poor little girl."

In the dining-room Mr. Peter was discovered resignedly contemplating the cooling soup. He had speedily recovered from the shock of evil tidings, and had stolen away to await, in hungry impatience, the appearance of the rest of the party.

Slowly the slow train, the one Cicely had known she should just catch, by hastening to the station as soon as she had read her letter, crawled along the iron road on that wet evening. It stopped at every station on the way, now and then certainly to take up a damp traveller, who watched its approach from under a dripping umbrella; but more often, so it seemed, for the mere pleasure of stopping. Cicely had plenty

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of time to think. She was alone in the compartment she occupied; and, oh! how often her longing impatience outstripped the tardy engine, and brought her in imagination to the London terminus. She seemed to be there, alighting from the train, hailing a cab, and off again to Waterloo Station, and then for ever returning to the monotonous jarring of the carriage, the fading light, the dripping, dreary rain, miles away from London still.

The old impatient habit of acting on any sudden impulse, the old dislike to having her actions discussed, possibly controlled, and more still the frantic fear that discussion *now* would delay her departure, perhaps delay it till too late, had combined to prompt her to this sudden flight. Though she had only once read her Aunt's note, its every word seemed burnt into her brain, and she went over it again and again, gathering no hope, but feeling more and more desponding every moment. The unmistakable tenderness and affection that breathed in Miss Joan's few lines, even the fact that they *were* so few, had touched Cicely deeply; for it showed an *understanding* of what she felt

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for which she had not given her aunt credit. More and more strongly the sense grew upon her that she had behaved badly; and at last, clear and steady, there dawned in her heart the wish to make amends. She went over, in her own mind, every hour since her uncle's death. Thought of her schemes for Marion's benefit, of her theories with regard to her education, of the vows she had made to devote herself to the children, and contrasted her dreams with her actual deeds. Marion spoilt, encouraged in naughtiness, her lessons neglected, both children left at last entirely on Miss Joan's hands, and all because of a wayward spirit that made Cicely rebel against receiving a kindness with common gratitude, even while availing herself of it in fact; a spirit that blinded her to the duty of submission to her elders, and filled her head with nonsensical ideas of independence. That "noble independence!" Cicely knew it by its right name now — headstrong pride in being her own mistress, and owing obedience to no visible authority. Poor child! she had learnt to long for the voice of authority. Oh, how comfortable it would be to obey! If only

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Marion lived. In her distress she spoke her little sister's name out loud, and then bowed her head into her hands in an uncontrollable fit of weeping.

The tears did her good, and it was well she used in the best way the quiet hours of that weary journey, for by the time she reached London the power to think at all seemed gone, and only a dull sense left that she must make haste to Marion. Like a dream was the noisy drive through the wet glistening streets, where gas-lights flared in the shop-windows and the foot-passengers jostled each other on the pavements, slippery with mud, where there was a block of vehicles bringing her cab to a standstill for a few moments, just opposite some theatre with a dazzling illumination over the doorway, and once a sudden shout as a little child was nearly knocked down by the horse. Like a dream it was to stand in the cutting draught at the station, and there to hear that the last down train was gone, and there would not be another till the early parliamentary in the morning. In the empty waiting-room Cicely threw herself upon one of the leather

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benches, and fell at once into a troubled sleep, real dreams chasing each other through her brain. It had not occurred to her to take food, and, if the idea had presented itself, she would probably have turned from it with loathing. Wayfarers through life are very like people on an ordinary journey. Old travellers know well that sorrow must needs eat and sleep just as they know that long journeys must not be taken fasting. But Cicely was ignorant and inexperienced.

In the cold light of a dull misty morning she stood shivering on the platform, still with no other thought than Marion—Marion was dying, she must make haste to get to her. At last there was a feeling of relief when the train started. The light grew and strengthened, sunshine brightened the fields and meadows, clouds rolled away from the sky, as they neared Basingstoke, fresh autumnal air fanned her cheeks and seemed to revive her, and by the time Southampton was reached, the morning gave every promise of a splendid October day to follow.

Moving stiffly and slowly, Cicely left the train, and at first looked round instinctively for Jacob

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and the old grey, but instantly remembered that this was not the hour at which she was expected. In a dreamy state, only half conscious of what she was about, she despatched a porter for a fly and gave orders to be driven quickly home, the sense of unreality weighing on her more and more painfully as she passed along the familiar road.

A silvery light shone on Southampton Water; the leaves in the hedge-rows were turning crimson, but the forest was still almost in its full suit of summer green — there the leaves hang long upon the trees and change their colour late. Actuated by some dim sense that she must be mindful of little Marion's comfort, Cicely stopped the fly before the sound of wheels could be audible in the sick-room, and made her way up to the house on foot.

The hall-door stood open, but there were no signs of life about the place, and the upper blinds were drawn closely still. With beating heart and trembling limbs Cicely passed up the stairs, and seeing that the door of Miss Joan's room was ajar, went towards it and softly pushed it open. Her aunt stood at the window, in the

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act of drawing aside the blind to look out, after her long vigil; she had risen late and was only just dressed. At the slight sound Cicely made Miss Damer turned.

"My child! My poor, poor child!"

In the pitying tone, in the kind, outstretched arms, in the worn, haggard look, Cicely read the confirmation of her worst fears, and, not more overcome by the shock than utterly worn out in mind and body by fatigue, excitement, and long fasting, she tottered forward a few steps, caught hold of a chair to save herself from falling, but, before Miss Joan could reach her, lost consciousness altogether, and for the first time in her life fainted away.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

CICELY MAKES HER CHOICE.

A FAST of nearly twenty-four hours, in addition to the fatigue of a long journey taken under the pressure of great anxiety,—people cannot do such things with impunity! It was only to be expected that an illness should follow, and that Miss Joan, already worn out with nursing, should find herself with another patient on her hands.

But when did Cicely ever do what was expected of her? On recovering from that long swoon, and having been, with some difficulty, made to understand that her fears for Marion were unfounded, for the child was safe and surely, though slowly, mending, Cicely had no sooner fully taken in that blessed assurance than she fell asleep in Miss Joan's face! They roused her, after a fashion, to force nourishment upon her, but, smiling blissfully, she fell asleep again in the very act of swallowing. And

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she slept on and on as though she never meant to wake again.

The glorious morning fulfilled its promise, and was followed by a glorious autumn day. The sunshine flooded Miss Damer's room and lit up every corner of it, till, as it reached the tangled masses of fair hair upon the pillow and lit them up also, Miss Damer drew down the blinds. Marion roused up and was fed and petted, and listened eagerly to the news of her sister's return. Little Bertie crept in on tip-toe to watch the sleeping girl, standing motionless beside her until the temptation became too strong for boy-nature to resist, and he tickled her cheek softly with a long fern-leaf from the Forest. Cicely stirred slightly, frowned, passed her hand over her face, and Bertram was banished to the Wards. The sunshine passed away, and shadows stole into the corners of the room instead. The chilly evening made a fire acceptable. The wood crackled, the flame shot up, its ruddy light took the sunshine's place, or rather fought for it with the shadows, and still Cicely slept on.

"Seven hours!" said Miss Damer to herself, as

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she stood watching the cheek where the bloom was visibly returning, the firelight meanwhile throwing her shadow on the ceiling, a giant shadow bending and swaying over Cicely like some benevolent demon, now sinking down altogether, now leaping up as the flame leapt. "Seven hours! It's well to be young."

As she watched, the blue eyes opened and met her own, at first with a look of bewilderment, then with full consciousness of all that had happened. The crimson colour mounted to the roots of Cicely's hair, and her first words were—

"Oh, Auntie! I'm sorry; I am indeed!"

"Say no more about it, my dear," answered Miss Joan, ringing the bell as she spoke; "it was an insane proceeding, and how Captain and Mrs. Damer can have permitted it passes my power to imagine."

"Eh? I don't understand," said Cicely, looking and feeling puzzled as she nestled her pretty head amongst the pillows and followed Miss Joan with her eyes; "surely you don't think *they* had anything to do with it?"

"They had, my dear. When I was your age

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no one having the care of a young girl would have sanctioned anything so improper as this journey by yourself. A night at the station, too! Most inconsiderate! The time-table might, at least, have been consulted."

"But they *didn't* sanction it! They didn't know of it!" cried Cicely, considerably crest-fallen at the discovery that her Aunt was alluding to her *last* flight, which she really had flattered herself was rather heroic. Clearly she must give up all attempts at being a heroine. If she could not play the part under such interesting circumstances as those of last night she would never be able to play it at all.

"No one knew I was going away; you must not blame Frank or Annie. I've no doubt they consulted the time-table after I was gone, and that Annie was in a fine way. As for Frank—I think I can see his face when I was reported missing! I suspect he thought it a good joke. In fact," and her eyes sparkled mischievously, for now that she had once dropped her dignity, Cicely saw much that was absurd as well as wrong in the past; "in fact, I ran away again;" then, with a

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change of manner and many blushes, she added, "It is the first running away I want to ask your pardon for. Oh, Aunt Joan! I'm *so* ashamed of myself!"

"Say no more about it, my dear," repeated Miss Damer, going to the door to take from Martha's hand the tray of refreshments ordered to be in readiness the instant Cicely should wake, and carrying it to the bedside; "say no more about it, but sit up and eat."

Cicely obeyed. She did eat, and she said no more. She entered into no lengthy explanations, and made no other apology, but no other was needed in words, the girl's whole manner was an apology in itself. Miss Damer was content. Her own manner was as undemonstrative as usual, even the wiry little side-curls were the same, but in her heart of hearts she rejoiced over her nieces with a most unselfish joy. There was quite a colour in her faded checks as she—hovered, I was about to say, but even regard for dear Miss Joan must not mislead me into using so inappropriate a term—as she stalked would be more correct, from bed to bed: from Cicely, look-

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ing so good and mild, and eating cutlets with a submission and obedience beautiful to behold, to little Marion, peacefully sleeping and regaining strength every hour.

The elder sister wished to hear every particular of the child's illness, and Miss Joan gave her full details.

"But, Auntie, when I saw how you looked—and you seemed to pity me—what *could* I think but that my Marion ——" Cicely choked over her wine and water.

"My dear," began poor Miss Joan, remorsefully, "I fear my greeting was ill-judged; but if you could have seen yourself!" and she shrugged her shoulders expressively, recalling the utterly woe-begone appearance Cicely had presented. Travel-stained, dishevelled, her face so pale, and with great saucers round her eyes, dim with tears. Her looks might have justified any amount of pity.

Just then Phillis came to the door. She had brought Bertram back, and begged to see Cicely.

"We are so glad you are come home," she said as she stooped to kiss her.

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Cicely's ear was quick to detect the coldness of the tone.

"Are you?" she asked, doubtfully. "Well, I mean to try and make you so anyway, and to make Aunt Joan glad, too."

Phillis coloured.

"Don't try *too* hard. If you turn into a steady-going, good girl, what *will* become of us? What shall we do for a heroine?"

"Oh, that is a *rôle* I resign in Ellen's favour."

And now it was the turn of Phillis to detect a slight ring of disdain in her friend's words.

"Poor Nell! she wished to come over with me; but was not sure if you would care to see her."

"I'll run across in the morning, and make all right. We will exchange fresh twigs of heather, and start our friendship anew upon a fresh footing; that is"—and again the blush, so hot as to be almost pain, mantled in Cicely's cheek—"that is, if your mother —— Phillis, do you know whether 'evil communications corrupt good manners' happens to be a favourite proverb of hers?"

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"Dear Cicely!" exclaimed Phillis, bending down to give an embrace much warmer than her first had been, "I must run home now—I'll ask her at once;" and with a mischievous smile she took her departure.

Cicely lay silent for a few moments, and then electrified Miss Damer, by remarking, mildly,—

"I think I could take a little nap now, dear aunt."

"*A little nap!*" exclaimed Miss Damer; adding, however, immediately, "oh, pray do, my dear!" but relieving her feelings by the mental ejaculation, "Seven hours!"

By-and-by, when Cicely had recovered from the fatigue and excitement of her journey, and resumed her usual habits, she was touched to find how completely Miss Damer reinstated her in her old authority over the children; never interfering, leaving them as entirely to their sister as she had once insisted upon. *Now* Cicely was but too thankful, in the still delicate, if not precarious state of Marion's health, to be submissive to Miss Joan; to benefit by her experience, and share all responsibility with her.

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Together they watched over the little maiden, rejoicing at her progress, or trembling over the least drawback to her recovery, and together they talked over Bertram's future; his aunt detailing her plans for his education, and dwelling on the real pleasure she felt at the prospect of bringing up a boy entirely according to her own ideas.

Very affectionate letters came from Annie, with warm inquiries after the invalid, and urgent entreaties to Cicely to return as soon as possible, and bring her children with her. At last came a letter from Frank.

In the old-fashioned writing-case had been found the memorandum he was so certain must be in existence somewhere. A folded bit of paper in the loose pocket of the case, bore, in the Squire's own writing, the expression of the Squire's wishes, and Frank declared he should take immediate steps to carry them into execution. It was no Quixotic scheme this that Mr. Bertram Damer had drawn up, simply a just and equitable one. He had intended to settle upon the orphan children of his youngest sister the sum

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that would have been settled upon their mother had she married with the consent of her family—the same sum that had been the wedding portion both of Lady Stanner and Mrs. James Hart. Cicely and her brother and sister would still need a home, and that, her uncle had suggested, they should find either at Hurst, with his son and his son's wife, or with Miss Damer herself, as they might prefer. Frank added, that he begged to remind Cicely that he and Annie would be only too glad, should her choice fall upon them; also that, in any case, his young cousins must look to him for Bertram's education.

Cicely answered his letter gratefully and affectionately, but, with regard to her little brother's future, said she believed Aunt Joan wished to provide for him; and magnanimously added, "She has done so much for us already, it would be simple ingratitude not to accept from her any thing she offers."

"Will that do?" she asked, pushing the sheet across the table to Miss Damer.

"Very nicely, my dear, only——Cicely, you have said nothing as to your choice of residence."

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"Aunt Joan! Aunt Joan! I thought you had forgiven me!"

Cicely never stated her choice more explicitly than was implied in those words, but the orphans continued to live with Miss Damer. Many visits were paid to the old home, where Cicely's arrival was rejoiced over, and her departure bewailed, by her friends at Bennington after their usual tumultuous fashion; where she contrived to be amiable even to Lady Stanner and Mrs. Hart; where Mr. Peter was really led to believe that "the school of adversity" had done its work, and that his "very unsatisfactory niece" had become a reformed character; and where the Stanner girls were sadly disappointed in the anticipated "fun" to be got out of Cicely's temper. Annie was as affectionate and clinging as ever, and her farewell speech after each visit was invariably,—

"Oh, but, *do* stay altogether, Cicely! I can't think why you won't! I'm sure I always thought you would live here, and, you know, you *have* the choice."

Cicely became quite used to this. She would

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have missed it, had it been omitted. But as years went on and the nurseries at Hurst *were* occupied, though not by Bertram and Marion, while Annie's little affectations disappeared one by one as she grew to be, if not the wisest, certainly one of the most loving of mothers, the whole family acquiesced in the wisdom of Cicely's Choice. Miss Joan's lonely home continued to be brightened by the presence of her sister's children, whose warm affection repaid Miss Damer a thousand-fold for all the love she had lavished upon their mother.

So, then, there was no "poetical justice!" Cicely never really suffered for her folly, but the moment she grew reasonably good, her life was serene and happy instantly.

Ah! fortunately for the young, it is often so. Life is kind to youth, and offers opportunities for retracing false steps, and starting afresh, which it denies to maturer years. In youth we seldom *are* condemned to reap exactly as we have sown.

And, as for "suffering," Cicely would say the severe mortification of seeing the light in which her conduct was viewed by Ralph Morland and

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his mother, the dire penance of a six weeks' sojourn with the "sympathetic Annie," and the terrible fear for Marion—that all this was punishment enough for anything.

However, there is nothing further to record of her, and my tale is ended, since—greatly to the increase of her own happiness and the satisfaction of her friends—Cicely has ceased to be a heroine.

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